The Hudson Review

Autumn 1994

PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY
MALIBU, CALIFORNIA

$7 • $9 Can. • £5

OCT 10 1994
PAYSON LIBRARY
PERIODICALS

Hayden Carruth
Intelligence, Anyone?

Susan Balée
Flannery O'Connor Resurrected

Josiah Fisk
The New Simplicity in Music

Lawrence Douglas
E-Mail—a story

Richard Hornby
Remembering Joe Papp

POEMS BY Daniel Hoffman, Colette Inez, Mark Jarman, Maxine Kumin, John Frederick Nims

ANTHONY CARO AT SEVENTY BY Karen Wilkin

REVIEWS BY William H. Pritchard, Robert Schultz, Dean Flower, Harold Fromm, R.S. Gwynn, John Haines

43
0 73361 64805 1

A magazine of literature and the arts

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

JUVENILIA

Poems, 1922-1928

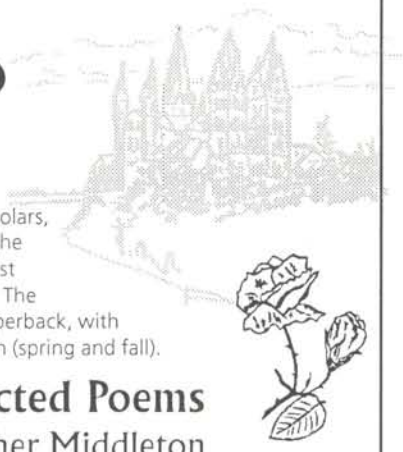
W. H. Auden

Edited by Katherine Bucknell

No other twentieth-century poet has left behind such a wealth of early poetry as did W. H. Auden. By bringing together for the first time all the poems written by Auden between the ages of fifteen and twenty-one, this book allows a rare look at the literary personality, development, and preoccupations of a major poet. The collection includes over 200 poems, most of them never published before. Each is generously annotated with information on Auden's education, reading, literary concerns, and personal life.

Cloth: $29.95 ISBN 0-691-03415-X

GOETHE: THE COLLECTED WORKS



This new English language series, freshly translated by eminent American and British scholars, will become the standard edition in English of the works of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. The first three volumes are now available in paperback. The remaining volumes will also be published in paperback, with three volumes released each bookselling season (spring and fall).

Volume 1: Selected Poems

Edited by Christopher Middleton

". . . the best available collection of Goethe's poems in English and probably the best yet done."—Theodore Ziolkowski, *The Hudson Review*

Paper: $14.95 ISBN 0-691-03658-6

Volume 2: Faust I & II

Edited and Translated by Stuart Atkins

Paper: $14.95 ISBN 0-691-03656-X

Volume 3: Essays on Art and Literature

Edited by John Gearey

Paper: $14.95 ISBN 0-691-03657-8

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

AVAILABLE AT FINE BOOKSTORES OR DIRECTLY FROM THE PUBLISHER: 609-883-1759

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

STORY LINE PRESS

Celebrating Ten Years of Literary Excellence

THE KING MY FATHER'S WRECK

A MEMOIR BY LOUIS SIMPSON

The King My Father's Wreck is the long-awaited memoir by one of the country's leading poets. The richness of Louis Simpson's life is reflected in a poet's prose, compressed and luxurious, which delicately weaves Simpson's varied life experiences into themes spanning generations, geography, and the particularities of individual lives.

220 pgs, 6 x 9, ISBN 0-934257-32-9 Cloth $24.95 /ISBN – 09-4 Paper $14.95

SUMMER BLUE

A NOVEL BY FLOYD SKLOOT

Summer Blue presents the story of a family reshaping itself in the long wake of tragedy. While on a cross-country road trip, a father and his troubled teenage daughter gradually release years of confusion and bridge the emotional distances that have separated them.

"Floyd Skloot...seems destined to create eccentric and memorable characters." —*Harvard Review*

276 pgs, 6 x 9, ISBN 0-934257-08-6 Cloth $18.95

WRITE OR CALL FOR A COMPLETE CATALOG:

STORY LINE PRESS
Three Oaks Farm
Brownsville, OR 97327-9718
tel (503) 466-5352 / fax (503) 466-3200

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Hudson Review

A magazine of literature and the arts

VOLUME XLVII NUMBER 3 AUTUMN 1994

ESSAYS
Flannery O'Connor Resurrected — SUSAN BALÉE — 377
The New Simplicity: The Music of Górecki, Tavener and Pärt — JOSIAH FISK — 394

MEMOIR
Fragments of a Memoir — HAYDEN CARRUTH — 345

FICTION
E-Mail — LAWRENCE DOUGLAS — 361

POETRY
Nine Unholy Sonnets — MARK JARMAN — 413
Bob; Blizzard — DANIEL HOFFMAN — 417
Basho Takes an Upland Journey to Visit Poets in the North; Hard Muse — COLETTE INEZ — 420
Games in the Darkening Air — NORMAN WILLIAMS — 422
In Praise of the New Transfer Station — MAXINE KUMIN — 423
Love's Progress; Strange! — JOHN FREDERICK NIMS — 425
Eminent Domain — ROBERT FARNSWORTH — 427

CHRONICLES
Theatre — RICHARD HORNBY — 429
Joseph Papp deflated
Film — BERT CARDULLO — 437
"Ruby in Paradise," "The Piano"
Dance — MARCIA B. SIEGEL — 445
The New York City Ballet after Balanchine

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Music — ROBERT S. CLARK — 449
Solo recitals around New York
Art I — JOHN LOUGHERY — 453
Frank Stella at the Whitney; Petrus Christus at the Met
Art II — KAREN WILKIN — 459
An overview of the work of Anthony Caro

Reviews
That Shakespeherian Rag — WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD — 467
"Appropriating Shakespeare," by Brian Vickers
Five Kinds of Desire — ROBERT SCHULTZ — 474
Elizabeth Seydel Morgan, Colette Inez, Charlie Smith, etc.
Labors of Love — R.S. GWYNN — 483
The enduring value of Donald Hall's work
Somewhat Less Than Holy — JOHN HAINES — 490
Autobiographical essays by Philip Levine
Impersonations — DEAN FLOWER — 495
Iris Murdoch, Ethan Canin, Anita Brookner, etc.
Himmelfarb, Mill, and the Dodges of Liberty — HAROLD FROMM — 503
Gertrude Himmelfarb's "Untimely Thoughts on Culture and Society"

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS — 511

TO OUR READERS

A new book edited by a Contributing Editor of THE HUDSON REVIEW has recently been published. In accordance with our policy, it will not be reviewed in these pages, but is listed below for the interest of our readers:

JOHN LOUGHERY, ed.: *Into the Widening World: International Coming-of-Age Stories.* Persea Books. $11.95p.

Publication of this issue of THE HUDSON REVIEW is supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in Washington, D.C., a Federal Agency, and by public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts. We wish to express our appreciation to these organizations for their generosity.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

EDITORS: Paula Deitz, Frederick Morgan

MANAGING EDITOR: Ronald Koury

ASSISTANT EDITOR: Nicholas Cheonis

ADVISORY EDITORS: Hayden Carruth, William H. Pritchard, Frederick Brown, Sonya Rudikoff, Dean Flower, Emily Grosholz, Dana Gioia, Gary Krist

ASSOCIATE: Vincent M. Macchia

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS: Marcia B. Siegel *(Dance)*, Robert S. Clark *(Music)*, Richard Hornby *(Theatre)*, Bert Cardullo *(Film)*, John Loughery *(Art)*

THE HUDSON REVIEW is published quarterly by The Hudson Review, Inc., 684 Park Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10021. It is indexed in the Social Sciences and Humanities Index and in the American Humanities Index. Book reviews are indexed in Book Review Index, and poems in Index of American Periodical Verse.

Individual subscription $24.00 per year in U. S.; foreign including Canada $28.00. Single copy $7.00. Special rate for bulk orders. U. S. A. Newsstand Distribution by Eastern News Distributors, Inc., 2020 Superior Street, Sandusky, Ohio 44870. Telephone orders for retail and wholesale distribution: 1-800-221-3148. Library subscriptions in England: Periodicals Division, B. H. Blackwell Ltd., P. O. Box 40, Hythe Bridge Street, Oxford. Back issues and reprints of Volumes I—XLIV available from AMS Press, Inc., 56 East 13th Street, New York, N. Y. 10003. Microfilms of Volumes I—XLIV available from University Microfilms, Inc., 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, Mich. 48106. We handle directly all requests for permission to photocopy.

We urge individual and library subscribers to inform us promptly of address changes to insure the continuity of their subscriptions. Claims for missing issues will not be considered after six months from date of publication. We regret that we cannot provide refunds on canceled subscriptions.

Unsolicited mss will be read according to the following schedule: *Nonfiction*: January 1 through March 31, and October 1 through December 31; *Poetry*: April 1 through September 30; *Fiction*: June 1 through November 30. Unsolicited mss received at other times will be returned unread. Manuscripts submitted by subscribers who so identify themselves will be read throughout the year. Manuscripts will not be returned nor will inquiries be answered unless accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes. No responsibility is assumed for their loss or injury.

Opinions expressed by contributors are not necessarily those of the Editors.

Printed in the United States of America. Second Class postage paid at New York, N. Y. and at additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to THE HUDSON REVIEW, 684 Park Avenue, New York, New York 10021. Registered U. S. Patent Office.

Copyright © 1994 by The Hudson Review, Inc. ISSN 0018-702X

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

bone by bone

short stories by

Gary Krist

"[A] GIFTED STORYTELLER... Krist has created stories that read true to the American experience." —Elizabeth Gleick, *Newsday*

"THOROUGHLY SATISFYING...This group of short fiction is one of the best I've read in the last year." —Clay Reynolds, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*

"Krist is...a banner carrier for the long-awaited renaissance of the short story." —*Publishers Weekly*

By the author of THE GARDEN STATE, winner of the Sue Kaufman Prize for First Fiction

HARCOURT BRACE & COMPANY 1919–1994 SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS

HARCOURT BRACE

AVAILABLE AT BOOKSTORES EVERYWHERE

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NEW DIRECTIONS BOOKS
Fall 1994

JOHN ALLMAN

DESCENDING FIRE. Short stories. A loose chronicle of the lives of working-class New Yorkers, from the 1950s to the present. $19.95.

ADOLFO BIOY CASARES

SELECTED STORIES. Tr. by S.J. Levine. A fine intro. to one of Latin America's leading modern writers of amatory and magical realist tales. $21.95.

JOHANNES BOBROWSKI

DARKNESS AND A LITTLE LIGHT. Tr. by Leila Vennewitz. A dozen fable-like stories by the great German poet. $19.95. SHADOW LANDS: Selected Poems. Intro. by Michael Hamburger; tr. by R. & M. Mead. "The most distinctive poet from E. Germany" (*TLS*, London). $10.95 pbk. Original.

CAMILO JOSÉ CELA

MAZURKA FOR TWO DEAD MEN. Tr. by P. Haugaard. Powerful, bawdy novel by the 1989 Nobel Prize winner about the Spanish Civil War. $10.95 pbk.

SHUSAKU ENDO

THE FINAL MARTYRS. Tr. by Van C. Gessel. A *new* collection of stories by "the most important and interesting living Japanese writer" (Anthony Thwaite). $21.95.

LAWRENCE FERLINGHETTI

THESE ARE MY RIVERS. New & Selected Poems 1955–1993. Four decades of poetry by ". . . the foremost chronicler of our time" (*Library Jrnl.*). $11.95 pbk.

XAVIER DE MAISTRE

VOYAGE AROUND MY ROOM: Selected Works. Intro. by Richard Howard; tr. by S. Sartarelli. A mischievous 18thC French masterpiece. $14.00 pbk. Original.

WILLIAM SAROYAN

FRESNO STORIES. "Genuine gems."—*Booklist. A ND Bibelot.* $5.00 pbk.

PETER DALE SCOTT

CROSSING BORDERS. Selected Shorter Poems. Poetry that achieves "the quiet authority of the best later Williams" (*TLS*, London). $11.95 pbk. Original.

MURIEL SPARK

THE COMFORTERS. The delicious 1st novel by "the most gifted and innovative British novelist of her generation."—David Lodge, *NY Times Bk. Rev.* $10.95 pbk.

ROSMARIE WALDROP

A KEY INTO THE LANGUAGE OF AMERICA. Poetry which explores the legacy of cultural imperialism, the conquered, and gender. $10.95 pbk. Original.

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

THE THEATRE OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS VOL. VII. In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel and Other Plays. The shorter plays of the late '50s and '60s. $19.95 pbk.

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

ASPHODEL, THAT GREENY FLOWER & OTHER LOVE POEMS. Intro. by H. Leibowitz. Selection of Williams' love poems. *A ND Bibelot.* $5.00 pbk.

NEW DIRECTIONS 80 Eighth Avenue, New York, NY 10011

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

PITTSBURGH
Poetry Series

Photo: Sue Cowing

Late Empire

David Wojahn

"With its energetic language, ambitious craftsmanship, and unflinching approach to extreme situations, this book is fully engaged in the quest for the meaning of human existence."—Maura Stanton *$10.95 paper*

Photo: Gail Folda

Weather Central

Ted Kooser

"Kooser has written more perfect poems than any poet of his generation."—Dana Gioia, *Can Poetry Matter?* *$10.95 paper*

Photo: John Eddy

School Figures

Cathy Song

This third book by Song, one of America's premier Asian-American poets, presents poems like an ice skater's school figures—the pen moving silently and deliberately across a white expanse of paper, tracing memory and experience, bringing pressure to bear upon the blade of language to unlock "the invisible fire beneath the ice." *$10.95 paper*

Photo: Harry Zanotti

Tall Birds Stalking

Michael Van Walleghen

In this fourth collection by the Lamont Award winner, the experience of loss gives way to that lifting of the spirit we feel in the presence of exuberant formal invention, in the luminous order of metaphor and metaphysical insight. *$10.95 paper*

Available at local bookstores, or

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH PRESS

c/o CUP Services, Box 6525, Ithaca, NY 14851 800-666-2211

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The New Criterion

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

In our fall issues . . .

"The New Republic" at 80 *by Hilton Kramer* • What's wrong with equality? *by Roger Kimball* • The letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu *by Joseph Epstein* • William Blake & the book *by Daniel Mark Epstein* • On the dehumanization of art *by Mark Helprin* • The American Academy in the 20s *by Cynthia Ozick* • The films of Jean Renoir *by John Simon* • Martial in English translation *by Charles Tomlinson* • Fitzgerald & his biographers *by James W. Tuttleton* • The life of Christina Stead *by Brooke Allen* • The legacy of Russell Kirk *by David Frum* • Dance *by Laura Jacobs* • Theater *by Mark Steyn* • The media *by James Bowman* • New poems *by Frederick Morgan, Enid Shomer, Richard Lourie & others*

The New Criterion
850 Seventh Avenue
New York, New York 10019
(212) 247 6980

Subscription information:
1 year $36; 2 years $65.
Outside USA, add $7 per year.
Payment in $US only.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

HAYDEN CARRUTH

Fragments of a Memoir

Intelligence, Anyone?

Figuring back, I'd say it must have been 1929 when pupils in the third grade at Mitchell Grammar School in Woodbury, Conn., were given the Stanford-Binet IQ test. Connecticut was said at the time to have one of the best public-school systems in the country, paid for with funds still accruing from the sale of the Western Reserve in the early nineteenth century; this is what we were taught at any rate. The Stanford-Binet test, long since discredited for its bias toward middle-class Anglo literacy, was then still new and well-regarded. What the state expected to achieve by administering it to all its third-grade pupils I don't know and can scarcely imagine—except that it couldn't have been done in our properly egalitarian school systems today. But I believe the state was trying to do its best. Mitchell Grammar School was the least of schools, but still the teachers, all of whom I remember, were well-trained, certified, devoted, convinced of the importance of their work. They took the test seriously.

I scored high, well up in the classification of genius. It was a disaster. From the first grade on my teachers hadn't known what to do with me, in part because my father had taught me to read and write when I was four years old. I always already knew what I was supposed to learn. They put me at the back of the room in a corner by myself and gave me books to read. In those days, even though Connecticut was a wealthy state and the educational system was reputed to be "advanced"—hence the intelligence tests—we still had four teachers and four classrooms for the eight grades of grammar school, a small step up from the one-room school, so that the third grade, for instance, occupied one half of a room and the fourth grade the other. When a girl or boy in the fourth-grade half didn't know the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

answer to a question, the teacher would call on me, and from my place off in a corner of the lower grade I'd give the answer. Not for long, however. I learned soon enough that my ostracism was only made worse by this, and I began saying, "I don't know," which probably never fooled anybody then or since though it became and has remained my standard answer to every question. Some readers of my reviews and essays, including some of my editors, have complained about it.

The teachers wanted me to skip a grade, or maybe two. But my parents, who were conscientious and trying to be up-to-date, wouldn't permit it. They had read in a book by some predecessor of Dr. Spock that children should be kept in their own age groups, that skipping ahead in school would lead to disadjustments. Maybe that was right. I don't know. I labored—the right word, even though the academic side of the program was easy for me—through eight grades at Mitchell Grammar School and never found a solution to that problem.

As for me, what I wanted and wanted desperately was to get rid of my specialness and bury myself in commonness. I did my best to ingratiate myself with my classmates outside of school and to some extent succeeded; I had close friends in those years. I made myself a good, but not the best, marksman with a slingshot. I made myself a good, but not the best, player at marbles, both ring taw and pooning. I became a fast skater and took my part in prisoner's base and other games we played on the ice. At the swimming hole under the iron bridge on the West Side I became a fair swimmer and a courageous, not to say reckless, diver. And so on. I spoke in the accents of my friends, the girls and boys from the farms, listening to them, imitating them. Beginning at age six or seven I dissociated myself as much as I possibly could—not enough—from my family. I never spoke with my friends about what I read in books, though at home in the attic I continued to read a good deal, and I certainly never spoke with them about the fears and uncertainties that engaged my thoughts.

Many years afterward when I was in my late sixties I spent a couple of weeks in a mental hospital in Syracuse, and there I was subjected to "psychological testing" that lasted two days. Most of the tests were intended to discover and expose this or that aspect of my personality, but a couple were measures of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

intelligence, and again, according to the report I was shown, I scored very high. In a way this was gratifying because in the intervening years I had been through all kinds of hell—alcoholism, electroshock, very long periods of treatment with narcotic, hypnotic, and psychotropic medications—and although my memory had been damaged apparently my crude mental capacities had not. I remember saying to the psychiatrist in charge of my case that what I'd been searching for all my life was a woman who was smarter than I was, so that I could quit all the masquerade. She said: "Not a chance." I was confirmed in my experience, which was not so gratifying. To become a psychiatrist, for instance, she had been through a course of study that appalled me—pre-med training, med school, internships, I don't know what all—a course of study to which I would never think of submitting myself, yet I was clearly smarter than she was, as she readily acknowledged. And she was a tough no-nonsense woman who had achieved her place in life against the odds and had suffered hardships—the ones I knew about—along the way. The people I've known personally whose intelligence, which I can only define as quickness and acuteness of understanding, was superior to mine can be counted on the fingers of one hand. It would be foolish to do that, of course. But I don't mind saying that the one who dazzled me the most—I'm speaking of those I've known personally, not of artists and scholars whom I've met only through their works—was Paul Goodman. Yet I've *felt* inferior to almost everyone all my life.

No doubt the consequence is obvious to people who have read my poetry. My early experience among my schoolmates in rural New England may not have been the only reason why I've written so often in languages not my own, but it is a substantial reason. Nor is it the only reason for my life in isolation later on, away from the world of glitzy literary brilliance in Boston and New York, the world I've glimpsed through my friends, Denise Levertov, James Laughlin, Adrienne Rich, Galway Kinnell, and others, for that matter the world I often enough have wanted and in which I've even known that if I could only find an entry I might shine there as well as anyone. But at a tender age I was taught to fear myself and the least promotion of myself, and this has lasted all my life. It has been reinforced over and over

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

again. I've fought against it and in recent years, in my sixties and seventies, have somewhat, though never wholly, prevailed. But in my middle years much of my best poetry—poems like "Marvin McCabe," "Regarding Chainsaws," "Eternity Blues," the asphalt georgics, etc.—was written in this fear and hence in common or colloquial speech. Some was in archaic or poetic speech, or in the characteristic speech of particular intellectual or professional sectors. Literary conventions, the guises of history, were important to me. Almost always and in hundreds of different ways I have submerged my ego in camouflage, fronts, deceptions of all kinds. Call it obfuscation but I hope not obscurantism. Usually I have been unaware of it. It has seemed the natural thing to do.

Well, I hope the work is honest fundamentally. But is it? I don't know.

A further note: not in grammar school, not in high school, but at some time later I came by gradual stages to see that my "I don't know" was more than mere evasion. I knew many things, I had a "photographic memory," but in issues of substance, including moral issues, I truly didn't know. And neither did anyone else, at least that was—and is—my understanding. Knowledge is a function of ego, and like ego exists in the concrete world; it has its importance. But to transcend ego, to become an authentic subjectivity, to become undetermined, was what life in its fullest potentiality was all about. Knowledge was arrogant and condescending, as I knew for years and years and then found even more indubitably when I became an academic: the university is full of the empty bluster of the cognoscenti.

The ancients were right: what one seeks is wisdom. But they were also a little naive, having never suffered the degradations of mass culture and technocracy. The greater part of wisdom is its inaccessibility. Yet I still believe in the efficacy of straight thought—when it is in the service of magnanimity.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Matters of Language

In matters of language I've always been a stickler for detail. I suppose I've been a conservative. We see more and more, as for instance in ecological matters or in education, that the radical position *is* conservative, a desire to conserve and retain values that the merely liberal mind is willing to throw out. But how often this desire is misinterpreted!

When I was teaching I tried to induce among my students a functional understanding of the distinction between *lay* and *lie*, or between *who* and *whom*. I tried to show them the advantage of learning grammar and using a dictionary. But many of even the most intelligent writers in my graduate workshops, and for that matter many of my colleagues on the teaching staff, could not take it in. Why? they would say. What's the difference?

When I told them that love and devotion are the root of it they merely looked askance.

You choose correctly between *street car*, *street-car*, and *streetcar* not because the choice makes a substantive difference—it doesn't—but because you care for language, you are in love with it. A good carpenter cleans and puts away his tools properly, so does a good gardener or a good cook, and no one will ever convince me that a worker who ignores his tools will do satisfactory work. Appearances may be and usually are deceiving, especially in the arts, but Allen Ginsberg cares as much for language, and uses it with as much deliberate concern, as did Elizabeth Bishop or Robert Lowell.

If you are male your attitude toward language is analogous to your love of women, and vice versa. A lover does not mutilate his or her beloved, except in cases of insanity.

Logic is of not much value in itself, but an attention to logical analysis, such as lexicographers strive for in determining the historical meanings and stylistic attributes of words, denotes a respect for the human mind and hence for humanity in general, and this is what has been vanishing in my lifetime. My students could not see this. Human beings have a capacity for thinking as well as a capacity for suffering, and the two are closely connected if not combined, but my students responded

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

only to suffering, not to thought. They could not see that if they shut out the one they will soon shut out the other and end in indifference. Frankly, this appalls me.

When I earned my living as a literary hack I did a good deal of copyediting for the publishers in New York, including my friend James Laughlin of New Directions. Jas, as I call him, and I agreed—yet certainly no one could accuse James Laughlin, the principal avant-garde publisher in this country for fifty years or more, of literary conservatism. Attention to correct historical judgment, we felt, means respect for one's work, one's associates, and oneself. I looked up everything in *Webster's New International Dictionary*, the second unabridged edition, and I even bought a copy of it, a new one, for thirty-five dollars, which was more than I could readily afford in those days. It still rests on a table in my workroom and is used many times every day. Believe me—or believe any copyeditor—you need to look things up, you cannot rely on guessing or memory. *Phys-ics* is hyphenated one way and *phy-sique* another. *Knowl-edge* is hyphenated after the "l," not before it. If you know enough about language you can figure these out for yourself, but it will take time and effort. The lexicographers have already done it for you. Relying on lexicographers doesn't result in decorum in the usual sense, or in stiffness or inhibition or pedantry. Many authors, probably most, who have been published by New Directions have used colloquial speech in their writing, slang, intentional and literal outrageousness of all kinds. They have tried everything that love of language can suggest. But they have never been neglectful—never. Carelessness was always the mark of a bad writer. Yet to me the common American mode in poetry today seems based exactly on a kind of strange premeditated neglect.

When I was writing my asphalt georgics I used a good many hyphenated words not only to keep the syllabic count, which I could have done without hyphenations anyway, but in order to find unusual rhymes. This wasn't merely expediency, however. It was care. I looked up every hyphenation to make sure it was correct before I let it into the poem. Jas also in his poems has used a lot of hyphenations in making his lines conform to the typewriter prosody he invented years ago, and he looks them up to be sure they're right. Maybe I got the idea from him, I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

don't remember. But I've admired his poems for a long time and have written a few of my own in his manner. I like that kind of writing. An arbitrary, artificial structure makes composition easier for me; not harder, as most people think. It gives the work greater force and fluency. You can't build a house, no matter how inventive or fanciful it may be, without a rigid frame.

I learned more about language—structure and mechanics—from studying Latin in high school than I ever learned elsewhere. I loved it and I was good at it. Unfortunately in my senior year I was the only student who wanted to continue in Latin and the rules would not permit a class for one student, so that was the end of my formal education in classics. Then in the army a few years later I was chosen—a great stroke of luck—to be trained as a cryptographer, what the army called a code and cipher clerk, though in the field we used only ciphers, never codes. I enjoyed that training also as much as any I ever had, and in three months learned as much as I've ever learned in so short a time. Even now, fifty years later, I break the cryptograms in the newspaper every day, though I long ago gave up crossword puzzles, anagrams, and other word games, including that supreme idleness called Scrabble, as a waste of time. Does this fascination with words, grammar, the mechanics of language make me inevitably a fussbudget and a pedant? Has it hurt my poetry? I don't think so. Writing sonnets can make a poet foolishly punctilious and academic, as we have all seen in numerous instances. But writing sonnets can also liberate a poet's natural gift for lyricism and his or her deepest, most authentic, determining emotions. It depends on the poet.

My Life in Music

My life in music began, as far as I remember, when I was three years old, shortly after we moved from Waterbury to Woodbury. I was sitting on the linoleum-covered floor of the central room upstairs, which we called "the hall," in front of our old Victrola. My mother put on a record of "The March of the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Tin Soldiers." The music was remote and tinny. I can still hear that strange timbre, as if the sound were coming from another world (as in a way it was). I was enthralled. My mother played the record over and over for me. Before long I learned how to climb on a stool and crank up the Victrola myself, and put on the record and listen to it with my feet bouncing and my whole body straining and dancing. I probably haven't heard that tune in more than sixty years but I can still sing it effortlessly.

The record was a thick, heavy disk with one side blank and a red label. The Victrola stood on a matching walnut cabinet that held a few other records, mostly operatic, Schumann-Heink and Caruso. I played these other records too, but they didn't appeal to me as much as the instrumental music, the band music, and this has been the case, with a few exceptions, ever since. The Victrola used wooden "needles," three-sided pegs about half the thickness of a pencil and an inch or so in length, which you sharpened in a tool that resembled a pair of pliers or a paper-punch; you inserted the peg and squeezed the handles, and the end of the peg was shaved off on a bias, so that one of the three edges became the point. I loved to do this, or to work with any tool, and I used up a good many needles when my mother wasn't watching.

(Once in Waterbury when I was about one and a half my mother found me in the kitchen on top of the gas range with a burner turned on, flicking sparks from the flint-and-steel gadget that was used to light gas stoves in the days before pilot lights.)

Of course I must have heard music earlier than this. For some reason I can't remember my mother singing to me then or later, and it's possible she didn't. I remember only her whistling, which she did well and constantly as she went about her household chores. On the other hand I do remember my father's singing because it was so awful. He couldn't carry a tune to save his life, he couldn't even come close, and his singing was a mournful monodic hooting that moved me only to a sense of affliction. But it was his job to put me to bed at night, to read to me and sing the nursery rhymes, as he did bravely and miserably. My mother was just the opposite. She had nothing to do with my bedtime, but she had perfect pitch, which I was lucky enough to inherit.

A couple of years later we bought our first radio, an Atwater-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Kent with a speaker that stood on top. This was my mother's greatest joy. From that time until she died forty-five years later she listened to the opera every Saturday afternoon, and to every other program of serious music she could find. Undoubtedly this was in part what turned me off to most classical music from an early age, but especially opera. The shrieking sopranos and bellowing baritones of the 1920s and 1930s seemed to me anything but musical, and I was fascinated by music. (Drama meant nothing to me, then or now.) I played everything I could get my hands on: jews'-harp, bones, spoons, jug, kazoo, ocarina, harmonica, penny whistle, ukelele, guitar—but unfortunately not the piano, because we didn't have one. If I couldn't find anything else I'd stretch a rubber band and play on that. Making musical sounds was my obsession.

For me the best was the penny whistle or tin whistle: technically, an upright six-hole fife or flageolet. I used to buy them not for a penny but a dime at Woolworth's in Waterbury whenever I got the chance. They were made from stamped tin with a wooden fipple, painted gaudily on the outside: flimsy things that quickly got bent and rusty. Nevertheless I became a virtuoso. I quickly learned how to sound the accidentals, i.e., sharps and flats, and to play in five basic keys, two up and two down from the "open" key (which was usually C). Of course I couldn't, at that time, read a note and had no structural understanding, yet I could play almost anything I heard, including operatic bits from my mother's radio. To this day the tin whistle (now made of chrome steel with a plastic mouthpiece) is "my" instrument. From age six or seven to beyond seventy it has been, when I come to think of it, the most constant factor in my life.

Of course in those days everyone sang and children most of all, in school, at play, around campfires, wherever. We sang sentimental songs like "Juanita" and "Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair," Civil War songs like "Tenting Tonight" and "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," railroad songs like "She'll Be Coming Around the Mountain" and "I've Been Working on the Railroad," spirituals like "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," coon songs (as they were called) like "Old Black Joe," and hundreds and hundreds of others, including many hymns and carols. Also songs of the subculture, such as endless pornographic verses to the air of the "Toreador's Song" from *Carmen*. All this

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was outside the home and apart from the home. Home was *Tannhäuser*, the Fifth Symphony, and concertos by Liszt, Tchaikovsky, Franck, etc., a place where music and the idea of music were held in reverence and one was a listener, not a participant.

Nevertheless I began to take violin lessons when I was twelve, and I progressed quickly. My teacher thought I was a prodigy, as in a way I was. She pushed me hard. After a year I was playing Paganini caprices—but badly. Even then the curse of neurotic repression and alarm was upon me and I couldn't loosen up enough to play well. On the violin when I tried to make a proper vibrato the whole fiddle would shake and chatter under my chin so that I could never produce a really good tone, and sometimes I would misplay a passage simply because my fingers were clamped so tight to the strings. In school I broke pens continually because I gripped them so hard and bore down so heavily. I couldn't help it. Even now the plastic barrels of ball-point pens fracture in my hands.

Through high school I continued playing the fiddle, took lessons from a fifty-cents-an-hour near-charlatan who was all we could afford, and sat in the second-violin sections of a couple of orchestras, but when I went to college I left the instrument behind. I haven't touched it since.

I was a set-up for jazz. Talented but unable to play, also unable for whatever reasons to participate much in the music respected at home, yet at the same time acutely craving musical expression, my own or anyone else's, I needed jazz, needed it desperately, long before I really knew what it was. It was forbidden of course. I didn't have to ask. For my parents jazz was not something new but something already degenerate, the acculturation of whorehouses and speakeasies. In this they were close in feeling to the great majority of intelligent, literate people of their time. It was not a question of race. Our home admitted no bigotry, at least not of that kind. My parents must have known that jazz came from the South and was originated by African-Americans, but as good radicals they would have said it was not an art but a mere social phenomenon, a symptom of exploitation and declassification, like ungrammatical speech or drunkenness. For me it was—or it became—the appealing social antithesis of what I knew, what I was expected to know,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and consequently it fascinated me. But beyond that, in intonation, texture, rhythm, and all its sensuous qualities, jazz moved me viscerally from the beginning. The slurred notes and *off-the-beat phrasings made me respond autonomically inside* as if I were an animal in a mating dance.

As I've said many, many times it was music, real music. It was spontaneous, heartfelt music. Apart from all the social and other adjuncts fastened to it in the public mind, it was organized sound—vibrations moving through the air.

For years I've thought the first jazz record I heard was Benny Goodman's "Stompin' at the Savoy," but that wasn't issued until 1936 and clearly I've been mistaken. Either what I heard was Chick Webb's original version of the tune by Edgar Sampson, or another number by the early Goodman band, the one with Bunny Berigan and Bud Freeman in it, which over the years became conflated in my memory with "Savoy." Or I may have heard something else altogether. It doesn't matter. What I know is that it was brought home from private school by our town's only rich kid, and it made an impression on me which I do remember—the event more than its content. It was immensely important. But at the same time I was buried in a small agricultural town in New England, as remote from jazz then as Siberia is today—though in fact I imagine people in Irkutsk and Yakutsk can hear plenty of jazz if they want it—and nothing much happened in my relationship to jazz—I still didn't know what it really was—until after my family moved to Westchester County, New York, in 1935.

Then I began to hear more and more jazz. I've written about this elsewhere, no need to reconstruct the details here.[1] In high school and college my interests went in two directions, toward the black swing bands and their remarkable sidemen, the bands of Ellington, Basie, Lunceford, Kirk, Hopkins, all of them deriving from work done in the 1920s by Fletcher Henderson and Benny Moten, and on the other hand toward the music of New Orleans and Chicago, the small freely swinging groups playing essentially unarranged numbers from a standard repertoire. But I didn't think a great division separated these styles. Sidemen from the big bands often played in small groups

[1] Much of what I've written about music is contained in *Sitting In: Selected Writings on Jazz, Blues, and Related Topics*, University of Iowa Press, 1986, rev. ed., 1993.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

working in the mode of ensemble improvisation, and musicians from New Orleans and Chicago, people like Zutty Singleton, the De Paris brothers, Darnell Howard, Albert Nicholas, Davey Tough, Jimmy McPartland, even Bix Beiderbecke, often worked in the big bands. Not until after the war, after the bop revolution, did deeper divisions among musicians of different ages and from different regions, working in different modes, become conspicuous. And when it happened I regretted it. I even resented it.

In high school and college I met others who were interested in jazz, but not many. We were still in those days thinly scattered in most of the country. White people who listened seriously to jazz were oddballs, rather disreputable oddballs. We formed a kind of avant-garde, and even in those days, though I knew little about literature of the twentieth century, I thought an affinity ought to exist between admirers of jazz and readers of *Ulysses* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. It didn't. Serious writers before the war had no interest in jazz as music but only as a degenerate social and cultural phenomenon which could be evoked in writing sometimes sympathetically and sentimentally, as in the work of Joseph Hergesheimer, but more often disparagingly, as in T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land." I believe jazz was not accepted in white American literature on its own terms until the 1950s and even then by only a few percipient independents like J. F. Powers and Kenneth Rexroth.

However, some of the jazz people I met in college were both more knowledgeable and better off than I. They could teach me. They had records and record players. This was extremely important. I didn't have a record player of my own until 1946. At that same time jazz was becoming available on radio, and at home and later in my dorm room I had a little AM set that could bring in remote broadcasts from hotels and ballrooms late at night, segments of Earl Hines from Chicago or Erskine Hawkins from the Savoy Ballroom in New York. I listened with the sound turned way down and my ear up close to the speaker. Moreover at least a little jazz, and sometimes a lot, was mixed into the copious productions of the best white swing bands of the period, Goodman, Herman, Shaw, Barnet, etc., and could be heard on juke boxes everywhere. When I had a chance to invest a nickel in Tommy Dorsey's "Marie," for instance, I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

would do it gladly and would put up with the stupid arrangement—Dorsey's smarmy trombone and Jack Leonard's bland vocal against the unison singing of silly responses by the whole band behind him—for the sake of the solo by Bunny Berigan, which still seems to me one of the great trumpet improvisations of all time. Lovers of jazz then and earlier always have had to search for it wherever they could find it, often enough fixed within the effusions of commercial dance bands like an exquisite brooch on a frilly bosom.

During this period and beyond the tin whistle remained my chief means of making music for myself. I learned to play things like the Berigan solo in "Marie" and other famous pieces, but mostly I jammed by myself or with the radio and, later, records. When I was able to buy a whistle tuned to B-flat, this became easier. Then in about 1949 or 1950, when I was living in Chicago, my friend Andy Park (Robert A. Park) loaned me a clarinet and offered to teach me to play it. Of course I accepted. The clarinet was the older kind with the Albert system of fingering, which was favored by most of the early reed players from New Orleans. I was delighted with it. I found that my facility with the tin whistle helped a good deal in learning; after all the six-hole pipe was one prototype of all woodwinds. I began improvising on the clarinet almost immediately, developing a bluesy tone, experimenting with slurs and glisses. I loved it. I was working in a publishing office, burdened with too many duties, taking home a heavy briefcase every night, but I made time to practice. Andy helped me to relearn the reading techniques I hadn't used since I quit the violin and apply them to the clarinet. He also helped with things like the slap-tongued staccato and how to play high notes clearly and with proper intonation. Once a week or so we would play simple duets based on transcriptions of themes by Mozart and Beethoven. Occasionally I played with Don Ewell, the jazz pianist who was my good friend at that time, doing things like "Grandpa's Spells," "Someday Sweetheart," "Wolverine Blues," "Sugarfoot Stomp," etc., simple tunes that were part of the standard jazz repertoire, and that I knew well.

But I left Chicago and moved to New York not long after this. I gave Andy back his clarinet. For a while I didn't have one, which was disturbing. Then one afternoon when I'd been

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

drinking in a bar on Third Avenue, I said to myself, "What the hell," and walked up to Schirmer's on 43rd or 44th Street, and bought a Paris Selmer for $750, which was an enormous amount of money. I paid for it on the installment plan and never regretted it. A Paris Selmer was not quite top of the line, but close to it, a beautiful instrument. I was living on East 32nd Street in a big one-room flat. I bought Mozart's Clarinet Concerto in A and taught it to myself, not caring that I was playing it on a B-flat instrument, and for reasons I didn't and don't understand the neighbors never complained. When I entered the psychiatric hospital in 1953, I worked with the musical therapist there on the Mozart and on other pieces, which helped a lot; it was the first time I'd had a trained musician to play the piano accompaniments. He was an organist, a member of the Guild, working in the hospital to earn extra money, and I wish I could remember his name. A few times I played in front of his organ accompaniment in the empty hospital auditorium, our sound echoing in the big chamber—a great experience.

In 1955 I left the hospital and entered a period of nearly total seclusion that lasted five years and of somewhat less than total seclusion continuing another ten or fifteen years beyond. During the first part of this I had time on my hands. I played the clarinet four or five hours every day. Though I still played jazz and blues, I concentrated more and more on European music, striving for purity of tone and clarity of phrasing. I still have the music I used then, many transcriptions from Bach, Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Chopin, Paganini, etc. Also an adaptation of Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto, clarinet music from von Weber, Brahms, Debussy, Schumann's "Fantasy Pieces," etc., such things as Hindemith's "Sonate" from 1939, Milhaud's "Concerto" from 1942, Copland's Concerto of 1950, Artie Shaw's Concerto for Clarinet, Alban Berg's "Fäntasiestucke," etc. Of course I had to play these without accompaniment and often I had never heard them. It was difficult. Hence my discovery of Music-Minus-One Records was a momentous event. These were recordings of clarinet ensemble music with the clarinet part left out, so that the musician at home could play with the record, filling in his or her part and thus participating in a full performance. It wasn't like playing with

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

live musicians, of course, there was no give-and-take; yet the other parts were well and imaginatively done and I learned a great deal. I remember Music-Minus-One recordings of the Mozart Quintet and Concerto, some early wind sextets and octets by Beethoven, and other pieces. But the one I liked best, the one that helped me the most, was Brahms's Quintet, which I still regard as one of the finest pieces of music ever composed—complex, original, even daring, yet deeply felt and expressive—I still listen to it from time to time on my CD player. I worked on that piece for a couple of years. And at the point when I had mastered it I think it's safe to say I was a pretty fair amateur clarinetist, even though I had never played in an orchestra or an ensemble of any kind.

Incidentally, I should say that in high school and college I heard live jazz whenever I could scrape together the means to do so, and in Chicago I heard it often and regularly at the Bee Hive on 55th, Jazz, Ltd. on the Near North, the hotels downtown, joints around 63rd and Cottage Grove or out on Western Ave. But after I left Chicago I heard no live music for many, many years. I was totally dependent on records and the radio. Even now I rarely go to clubs or concerts because, although I can do it if I have to, I still don't really enjoy myself in public meeting places.

During those years of seclusion I also played the tenor recorder, working on duets with my friend Tom Appel, who lived next door and was the only person outside my family I saw for five years. I enjoyed this, but more for the company than the music. Later I played a few times in recorder quartets and quintets, which met at the house of Tom's friends in Chappaqua, but I was too nervous to play well in a group. The fact is I never really cared for the recorder. Next to the clarinet it seemed plummy and fat.

After I moved to Vermont I continued to play the clarinet when I could, and at one point I taught myself the rudiments of classical guitar, but music more and more had to take a back seat to my work in the fields and woods, the garden, the barn, and of course to the heavy schedule of hacking in my cowshed. I quickly lost my embouchure. A time came when I didn't play the clarinet for more than an hour a week, then an hour a month. When my son took trumpet lessons I played duets with

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

him and taught him the "Tin Roof Blues," etc., but this was only for about a year.

As time passed I lost more than my embouchure. From childhood I had been short-winded, a genetic narrowing of the air passages that makes it difficult to exhale completely. By the time I was forty this had been made much worse by smoking. I had to struggle to play the longer phrasings without losing my breath altogether. And then more recently I've been troubled by another problem, which I've never investigated—just an additional revolting intimation of impending collapse, I say with a shrug—but which is probably caused by a hardening of the soft palate in old age. I can no longer retain wind pressure in my head if I've played the clarinet for half an hour or so: the air escapes through my nose in little burps like steam escaping from the pressure cap of an overheated radiator. How absurd!

Yet it doesn't greatly matter. Although I'm still regularly seized by a desire to blow when I hear other musicians blasting away on some good medium-tempo blues like "C-Jam" or "After You've Gone," I no longer feel really deprived, as I did so desperately, disconsolately, at one time. Often I've said I'd rather be a musician. It's true. The affective responses to poetry and jazz are not the same, obviously, but to the extent that they can be compared, jazz has meant more to me than poetry. I know, I have known all my life, that I could never be a musician in the public sense, and I've suspected, much of the time though not always, that even if my failings of personality were removed at one stroke by the Impossible, I'd still be no better than a middling musician. Well, I'd have been satisfied with that, I'd have been delighted and overjoyed by that (leaving aside for the moment what everyone knows about the hardships of a musician's life). What could have been better than being a musician and working every day in a free and genuinely creative fashion at a time when jazz was the newest, the fastest developing, and by far the most expressive style of imaginative interaction with reality. I believe jazz has been both a consonant accessory to and an eloquent articulation of every serious artistic, social, cultural, and philosophical happening in my lifetime. I wasn't able to participate, except by writing about it and by letting music influence the rhythms and sonorities of my poems. But that's ok. Now I'm just glad I was alive to hear it.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LAWRENCE DOUGLAS

E-Mail

After the fiasco with Professor Lowry, Celia needed companionship. She got two kittens.

She named them Virginia and Leonard, after the Woolfs. Leonard was a smart tabby, with a cocky patch of tan over his left eye. Virginia was the color of pitch, and while Leonard would saunter fearlessly down the middle of the room, Virginia kept close to things, weaving between chair legs in Celia's small, sparsely furnished apartment, her tail turning like a periscope.

The kittens were better than any medication. While Celia worked on her dissertation, they would stretch on the wooden floor, resting in a shaft of fall light. Finding herself weepy in mid-paragraph, she would slowly stroke Virginia, waiting for the episode to pass. At night, she would fold out the futon couch that also was her bed, and the three of them would lie curled in a warm ball.

It was a cold day and dry leaves scuttled on the walk in front of her apartment house. Leonard chased Virginia around the twisting stacks of books on the floor, raising contrails of cat hair. Celia drank tea, wrapped in a shawl she had bought in Dublin, and felt a glimmer of happiness. Nico Lowry was allergic to dander.

The year before, Celia had watched helplessly as Philip, her boyfriend through six years of graduate school, depression and poverty, slowly unraveled. First Philip gave up on his dissertation, throwing away a stack of notebooks. He began spending his days in the basement strumming on his old Stratocaster and listening to early Led Zeppelin. He hid bags of rotting garbage in the closets and arranged lines of dead wasps on the windowsills. Then one day he was gone. He had moved to San Francisco to work in his brother's bookstore.

By the time the annual grad student Christmas party rolled

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

around, Celia was scarred but eligible. It was hardly a lavish affair, some chips and drinks spread out on sawhorse tables in a dreary social hall meant to resemble the den of an English gentleman; still it was one of the few events organized to interrupt the tedium of a doctorate. With the small stipend she earned as a teaching assistant, Celia bought an Italian miniskirt and used eyeliner to exaggerate what Philip had called her "Cleopatra eyes."

But it rained the night of the party, and there was no music because someone forgot to bring a cassette player. Besides the familiar faces, the only man to approach her was Oscar Harrington, a paunchy member of the English department's old guard who spent his afternoons at the gym watching girls in Spandex work the Stairmaster. "I've heard from my colleagues in Comp. Lit. that you're doing important work," he told her. "I'd be interested to read your chapters . . ."

She was about to leave when she saw Nico Lowry standing with the theory crowd. "Brilliant" was the word on the newest member of the Semiotics department. But whether he was gorgeous or grotesque she couldn't say. His ears were childishly small, pinned close to his head like a dog's; and his nostrils were complexly folded, as if chronic allergies had permanently transformed the geometry of his nose. His eyes, on the other hand, were large and dark, and a thick wave of black hair ever-threatened to break over his formidable promontory of forehead. She'd met him once at a lecture, and for months afterwards had exchanged furtive eye contact in the library. "He has a girlfriend," an acquaintance in the department told her. "A manic-depressive artist from Brooklyn. When she comes to visit, everyone on the block takes cover." He wore jeans, a white shirt with French cuffs and a narrow tie; and Celia noticed for the first time that he had an earring, a small diamond stud. He glanced at her expressionlessly, and she smiled. When the crowd parted, creating an open lane like a dancer's promenade, the young professor walked straight up to her and asked quietly, "What's your take on steamed vegetable dumplings?"

They arrived at the restaurant shortly before closing. Most of the tables were empty and a group of waiters sat in the rear, snapping the ends off string beans. Celia waited for Nico Lowry

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to charm her with stories about Princeton and Berlin, but as soon as they sat down, he fell into a brooding silence. She tried to impress him with her dexterous use of chopsticks, but the dumplings were slippery and after a brief struggle she joined him in his unapologetic use of a fork. She watched him pour three packs of sugar into a thimbleful of tea.

"Like David Lynch," Celia said, trying to sustain some conversation. "He's a sugar fiend, I read. He says it fuels his creativity. Don't you think his work's incredible?"

"Some of it I like."

"I know what you mean—he's so . . . *uneven*. But I loved *Blue Velvet*." Celia blushed at this admission—the suggestion that her imagination was drawn to the sublime terror of the sadomasochistic.

Nico blinked, but his dark eyes grew no darker with interest. "He's capable of some striking images."

His remoteness reminded Celia of the smug, ankles-crossed posture of her therapist, and now she drivelled on about her childhood in Kansas where her mother worked as a librarian and her father as a clerk for a bank. She described how as a child she would have staring contests with the screech owl that lived in the woods behind her parents' house, and how she read Shelley and Keats while wind rustled through fields of corn. Occasionally Nico glanced up, a detached half-smile forming on his lips, but then he would look away and finger his earring.

Celia excused herself and hurried to the bathroom. She tousled her hair in the mirror and examined her eyes for dark circles or puffiness. She made a little mirthful laugh to see if there was anything vulgar about the way her mouth opened, whether it exposed fillings or revealed her epiglottis. When she returned to the table and tucked her short skirt beneath her, Nico Lowry remained as withdrawn as before, his eyes fixed on the tablecloth.

The next morning Celia was playing computer solitaire in her bathrobe, when she noticed she had received an electronic-mail message.

To: Celia Russell (relation to Bertrand or Ken?)
From: Nico Lowry (no relation to Malcolm)
Re: Post-dumpling Depression
Celia, apologies for behavior that flirted with the atrocious. Many

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

things on my mind—I'll tell you about it one day. Though I'm sure my glum look suggested otherwise, I enjoyed the stories about America's heartland. Granted: I've never seen a tornado sweep across a field of wheat or seen a tomato the size of a medicine ball; still, I once saw, in an organic food market in Tübingen, a Siamese apple. Also—I love Blue Velvet. N.

After taking a couple of deep breaths, Celia transferred the note to a regular file and printed it out—the spectral shapes on the screen, the luminous floating signifiers, weren't stable enough to support the process of deep reading. It was the last line that troubled and thrilled her. *I love Blue Velvet.* Of course, it was possible that he had just made an inconsequential grammatical error, that he had meant to write *I loved* Blue Velvet; still, he had capitalized the name of the movie without underlining it; was it possible that by Blue Velvet he meant to suggest something other than the movie itself? And why hadn't he put "love" in the past tense—again it seemed to suggest that his passion wasn't limited to the film. Slowly she read over the message, nursing it like a drink.

After an hour of careful composition, she typed in a response:

To: Nico (short for?) Lowry (Just as well no M. connection: Under the V.—awfully tedious, don't you agree?)

From: Celia Russell (daughter of Thomas, clerk; and Margaret, née Parish)

Re: Siamese Apples.

Funny, but I've always been disturbed by deformities in strawberries—they remind me of those pictures you see of four-headed chickens. I hope you don't think that's odd. I read an interview with David Lynch (!), and he said that Japanese cubic watermelons give him nightmares. I've only seen Blue Velvet *once, and would love to see it again. I have a new VCR (I splurged), and if you supply the tape, I'll do the popcorn—or better yet, Snow Caps, those tiny half-spheres of dark chocolate covered with white candy balls. C.*

She read it over. Far too bold—she was basically propositioning a professor, and even if affairs between graduate students and junior faculty were commonplace, she didn't want to seem needy. Still, the Snow Caps ended things on an innocuous note. She hit the fateful key, sending it to him at the speed of light.

Two weeks of silence, and then she bumped into him in the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

library. She felt herself blush burgundy and her nostrils quiver. He had a pen in his mouth, his hair combed off his forehead like Yeats, and all he said was a nervous "doing research," before he pointed to his watch and hurried into a dark alcove of the card catalogue.

Celia passed an excruciating night, but the next day there was a note. *Apologies for yesterday and for taking so long to get back to you on your kind offer. Hectic, hectic days. Afraid I'll have to pass for the time being on the movie—Have to finish an article on Russell (of all folk) for something called the* International Encyclopedia of Knowledge *(nothing like a little old-fashioned positivism to restore one's faith in the concept of the West). But if you drop by my office, I'll take you to coffee. That is, if caffeine is one of your vices.*

Fearful that her therapist might find her behavior self-destructive, Celia did some research. Her acquaintance in the department noticed nothing unusual about her questions. "I think he's broken up with that nut," the woman said. "I mean, I never see her around. And we don't hear that horrible screaming every weekend."

The next afternoon, Celia tapped, then nudged open the door to his office. He was working on his computer, and slowly swiveled around to face her, staring over the top of his horn-rimmed glasses perched low on his nose. He raised an eyebrow with an actor's flair and smiled as if to say, *fancy meeting you here.*

"I've come for my coffee," Celia declared. She had decided in favor of her contact lenses, and she stood vaguely akimbo in her winter coat, trying to demonstrate that despite her bad posture, she was no pushover.

Nico eased his glasses back in place. The windowsill directly behind his desk supported an obscene display of cacti; from where Celia stood it was as if the fuzzy spiked Priapus rose straight out of his head. "I thought maybe you had come for these," he said, producing from the top drawer of his desk a small box.

"Snow Caps!" Celia exclaimed. "Well, are you a convert?"

"I ate them with pleasure. They're so small."

Celia blushed. She assumed there was some suggestive innuendo in Nico's remark, but before she could either identify it or think of a witty response, the phone rang. Immediately Nico's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

voice shied to a whisper, as he leaned forward in his chair and ran a hand over his forehead as if checking for a fever. *She* would *call now*, Celia thought as she informally inspected the office. It was bright and spacious with leaded glass windows that overlooked the faux Gothic courtyard. On one wall hung small framed pictures of Heidegger, Freud, and Charlie Chaplin; she smiled approvingly. On another wall, next to a framed map of the Berlin U-Bahn, was a picture of *Bauhaus* in concert, and the words went through her head, *a professor with an unerring eye for the cool.* On his immaculate desk was a pipe stand and a page of manuscript written in a small, meticulous hand. At one point, she looked at him and mouthed the words, *should I leave?* and he shook his head. He began to mouth a response, but then held up a finger to indicate he'd get off momentarily. Though she couldn't make out what he was saying on the phone, his tone encouraged her—an edge of mild impatience and condescension, as if he were talking to a troubled little girl.

When he hung up, he rose with a sigh. "Sorry to keep you waiting."

"Professors are supposed to do that—anyway I was admiring your office." She pointed to the place on his bookcase where copies of his three books were stacked. "And I was also admiring—well, what would the word be? Your prolificness . . ."

Nico slid a fountain pen into his breast pocket and slipped on a woolen overcoat. "I guess one of my virtues—or vices—is that I tend to work pretty fast."

"Really? I hadn't noticed." She hadn't meant to say it but there it was.

The tips of his ears reddened. "Sometimes," he said, "it takes a while to get a proper grasp on the material."

She knew she was also blushing absurdly—there was something fraught about playing these adolescent games with a powerhouse of postmodernism. "And are you having that problem in your work on Russell?" she asked.

He weighed his words. "I don't think it would be wrong to say I'm developing some strong feelings on the subject . . ."

Midway through her coffee Celia knew she was passionately in love. The avalanche of sugar that he let cascade into his double espresso, the thick maelstrom of hair that he swept off his forehead, the way he fondled his earring or touched the cap

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of his fountain pen while he listened to her talk—it made her want to massage his temples and kiss his chest. When he told her that as a child he had been fascinated by Japan and had longed to become a kamikaze pilot, Celia found herself laughing out loud; and when he rose to go to the bathroom, she let her gaze travel to the crotch of his snug jeans.

Afterwards he walked her back to her apartment. It was already dark and lightly snowing. Celia let her Dublin shawl fall about her shoulders, and the snow dusted her hair. Nico strode, long-legged, close beside her, a Princeton scarf tossed loosely around his neck. At one point she touched his arm; and later, he touched hers. But when she suggested as they idled in front of her building that he come upstairs, he gave a grief-stricken shake of the head. "Thanks, but I really couldn't."

"I'm sure you could. It's just one flight up. I'll show you my editions of Wordsworth . . ."

He smiled, preparing a pipe. "I'd love to but it's impossible. One day I'll explain." She gave him the opportunity at least to kiss her, but he turned away with a brief tragic wave.

That night she was about to send him a hysterical declaration of love when she saw that he already had left her a message. *These apologies are getting, I suppose, a bit predictable, but this time I think one is really in order. I fear I've been leading you on: I'm quite attracted to you, I think you already know that, but I don't want you to believe there's any desire to get "more deeply" involved. If this was already clear to you, then please ignore this message as merely a restatement of the obvious.*

When the shock subsided, Celia began to cry. Perhaps it was absurd, but she felt *this* was the man destined for her, that until now all her affections had been frittered away on the Philips of the world—men too emotionally crippled or psychologically impaired to plumb the depths of her womanhood. For even though she cursed her posture and doubted her fitness as a scholar, she felt that she was a woman with a poetical soul who could understand and calm the most fevered genius. But how could she convince this dashing brilliant mess that what he needed more than anything was her forgiving imagination and indulgent eroticism?

Days passed without further word. She sat for hours before the empty screen, composing phantom messages and then

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

erasing them at the last moment. *I hope I didn't upset you the other day. I love you, Nico. Hey, Lowry, long time no hear.* As dusk advanced, she stared at the ghostly vacant glow. Suddenly a word appeared on her screen. *Hello.* She stared at it until the monitor went blank and a new message appeared. *I said hello.* Briefly she thought she had lost her mind, had succumbed to the mental disease that she always feared she harbored within, and then she thought of the silly film she had seen with Philip at the nadir of his depression: a digital traffic sign communicates with a distraught man—it had so unnerved Philip he had run from the theater.

A new message flashed. *If you follow my directions, you'll be able to talk back to me.* Overbiting her bottom lip, she studied the commands and sent in response, *You mean I have to obey your directions if I want to talk to you?*

An empty moment; then, *Doesn't exactly follow logically, but I see your concern. Well, we've gone interactive. How does it feel?*

Thrilling. It's all so hyper-real.

Don't use your grad student lingo with a prof.

Pulling rank?

Just trying to defend the language—and, more importantly, break the silence. Thought maybe you'd had enough of my personal havoc (I have . . .). In any case, I didn't mean to suggest in that last epistle that we couldn't nibble on Snow Caps and drink coffee.

Elated, Celia sent back: *Maybe we should try coffee* with *Snow Caps.*

Hmm . . . the little white balls bobbing on the surface. . . .

Don't forget all the molten chocolate. It must get all gooey.

A pause. Then: *You're a genius of innuendo, Ms. Russell, aren't you?*

She whistled out loud. *Excuse me, Professor Lowry, but who started in with the bobbing spheres?*

A perverse reading—truly perverse. You're starting to sound like me.

When they finally logged off, Celia's heart was racing, and though the room was cold, there were crescents of sweat under her arm and beads of sweat on her forehead. She was supposed to meet an acquaintance for dinner, but phoned to cancel, stopping first to turn on the shower. She disrobed while dialing. Naked, she dashed across the icy floorboards and locked herself in the bathroom. There in the steamy shower she went through

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

half a bottle of coconut body lotion. When she finally emerged, she could barely stand. She threw herself under the comforter and didn't awake until morning.

A message awaited. She knew the pattern by now—it was time for the handwringing, Jesus Christ I don't know what came over me oh so sorry. But this one was short and to the point. *There's a lecture tonight, "Foucault and* The Fly*: A Reading of the Films of Cronenberg." How about it?*

When she arrived that evening, he was waiting outside Humboldt Hall, glancing at his watch. The ancient auditorium was crowded, and they took seats toward the rear. Most of the biggies were there—Forester, a shambling curmudgeon who once had been the friend of Trilling and Robert Frost and now found himself presiding over the collapse of the concept of literature; Pesto, recently named to the prestigious Golding Chair, in his grey jumpsuit and futuristic wrap-around eyeglasses; and Melissa Mann, whose work on gender and gentrification had recently been reviewed in a cover piece of *The New York Review of Books* that included a David Levine caricature of her long silver-streaked hair coiled about her head like a cobra about to strike. As Celia watched these luminaries settle in their seats, all of them waving or nodding at Nico, she felt a vague thrill to be seen in a black miniskirt next to the young star.

Applause greeted the famous lecturer who split his time between Paris and Palo Alto. No sooner had he rebuttoned his double-breasted blazer, run his hand through his Dracula-like widow's peak, and begun speaking in a beautifully accented voice, than Nico turned to Celia and whispered, "Is that necklace new?"

Celia shook her head. "I got it in Scotland. I was doing research at St. Andrews. Do you like it?"

Nico nodded. Frozen in surprise, she watched him lean toward her and touch the necklace that hung midway down her breasts. He ran the fine mesh of silver through his fingers, the way Philip had rolled his cigarettes. She didn't move.

"The gaze of the other," the distinguished guest said, "sublime and infectious, mates us with the monster, the Fly."

"It's really very beautiful," Nico whispered. "May I see that ring?"

The ring was also from Britain. But before she could remove

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

it, Nico simply took her hand. Holding her palm, he touched the ring, rotated it, slid it up her finger, and then slid it back down.

"But the discourse of ambivalence does more than define the film's textual pose," the speaker said. "It unites Oedipal rage with the disciplining technology of Hollywood, and by extension, the State."

Nico was delicately playing with her fingers, a light caress that almost tickled. He sat with his knees propped against the seat in front of him, like Tommy Chester whom she used to make out with in the old RKO theater in Lawrence when she was fourteen. A professor from the French department eyed them from down the aisle, but Nico didn't seem to care. He continued stroking her hand.

"Thus the body, transformed into the grotesque insect, emerges as the terrain of Marx's *ur*-struggle."

Nico leaned toward her and Celia felt his breath graze her ear. "I find you very beautiful," he whispered.

Celia could barely control her breathing. She took quick little pants and said in a hush, "Can't we get out of here?"

Out on the street, they leaned against a newly restored wrought-iron lamppost, and passionately kissed. "I have a down comforter from Ireland," Celia said, holding him by the ends of his Princeton scarf.

Nico covered her nose and forehead with a flurry of kisses, but the romance had vanished from his eyes. "You don't know how much I want to, but I simply have to go."

Celia stared at him. "I think I know *exactly* how much you want to. I mean, how long are we supposed to keep this up?"—he raised his eyebrow in a playful smirk, but she continued unsmiling— "I thought you had all but broken up with this phantom woman."

Nico took a step back. "Who told you about Andrea?"

"I don't know . . . people talk. All I meant was—"

"I've tried to tell you all along that we can't do this. Maybe I wasn't clear enough. I'm to blame; I know my behavior has been execrable. But what goes on between Andrea and me doesn't concern us. I suppose I'm to blame for not making this understood."

Celia shook her head. "I'm sorry. I just meant . . ."

Later, she lay in bed, weeping, hating him and hating herself

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

for timidly accepting his commands. She swore never to see him again. After three Tylenols and a glass of cognac, she nodded off close to dawn.

The doorbell stirred her from dreamless sleep. She glanced at the clock. It was well past noon. She slipped on a robe, quickly combed out her hair, and opened the door a crack. He was shivering in his overcoat, his chin nestled in his scarf. She couldn't even see his mouth when he spoke. "I don't teach today and I was wondering if you wanted to come shopping with me at Organic Connection."

She noticed that his hair, despite the winter cold, was still wet from a washing, and when he accepted her silent exhausted gesture to enter, grazing against her robe, she could catch the scent of his cologne. He looked as awful as she imagined she herself did—his cheeks were pale and puffy and he nervously toyed with his earring.

"I should get dressed," Celia stammered.

She led him by the pinky into her bedroom. Her blinds were still drawn, and on the floor beside her bed was the small mountain of Kleenex still damp with her tears. They stood frozen, then embraced, toppling onto the futon. Celia let her robe open and pressed her naked body against his overcoat. She covered his face and throat with a frenzy of kisses that turned into small hungry bites. Their teeth collided painfully, but no matter: she felt drugged, possessed by a narcotic of desire that was like madness. From that semiconscious oblivion she still had the presence of mind to appreciate the ease with which he slipped her a condom from his back pocket. She dressed him and guided him in, and was riding a wave of passion toward a crest she had never known when suddenly he withdrew, and with a stifled groan, finished things on her stomach.

"I have to go," he said, wretchedly, pulling up his pants.

Celia heard the door quietly close. She remained splayed on the bed like a body fallen from a building. It was like in a film: she could see herself, the disheveled mass, from the perspective of the ceiling camera. Presently she stirred. Darkness had fallen, and she had barely seen a shred of daylight. She pulled on a long sweater, and tucking her knees against her breasts, sat

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

at her desk. She read the message that awaited her on the screen, the words swaying like heat rising off new tar.

I know it sounds like madness (or worse, a slapstick lie) but I really didn't show up at your door meaning for that to happen. I thought there was still a vestige of self-control within me, though obviously I came "armed" for every contingency. All I know now is that this can't happen again. We must demonstrate the strength to be just friends.

Celia made herself some coffee and heated up a can of chicken soup which she ate with the bags of Saltines that she collected from the dining commons. Then she showered. It was close to midnight, but for the first time that day she dressed. She sat down before the dark screen.

But you see, Nico, I don't have to demonstrate anything. Because I don't want to be friends. *Call it love, craziness, lust—but that's what I feel. And I can't go on like this, a day of passion followed by another of withdrawal. It truly* is *driving me a bit mad. So I plead with you to make a choice.*

A day passed, two—a week. She sent him another note. *So what did you decide*? Then another. She knew, of course, what his decision must have been, but the thought that he wouldn't have the decency to tell her both crushed her and offered hope—perhaps he was incommunicado, held hostage by his crazy lover. A month passed and hardly an hour went by without her checking her e-mail. At night she would comb out her hair and slip into a nightgown, waiting for him to come pounding at her door, crazed with misery and desire.

Finally she called the department to see why she hadn't even bumped into him on the street or at his haunts in the library where she would linger, dreading yet praying for him to show up.

"Professor Lowry has taken a leave of absence for the rest of the spring semester," the secretary said. "Would you like his address in Berlin?"

"When do you expect him to return?"

"He's coming back to the States at the end of August, but he'll be on sabbatical in the fall. He hasn't yet told us what his address will be."

After she hung up, she looked at her calendar. Then she took her bottle of cognac and climbed into bed.

Spring came, and then summer with its impossible heat and isolation. She had, of course, to work on her dissertation, but

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

she could barely bring herself to read the poetry—every line suggested doomed romance and the oblivion of the soul. She wrote like someone doodling, her feeble progress interrupted by a fit of weeping or by a shocking fantasy that sent her rushing to the shower. She napped away whole afternoons only then to lie awake until dawn, staring at the ceiling or crying tears that didn't seem her own. On the worst night, she hid her scissors and knives, afraid of the dark thrill she felt staring at sharp blades . . . *"for many a time I have been half in love with easeful Death."* . . . She was surprised, then frightened, then resigned to her own inability to get over him.

"I've never been this way," she told her therapist. "I'm obsessing because there's nothing else in my life. The only men I meet are gay reference librarians. I spend my days reading the works of poets who killed themselves. But why doesn't he at least send a postcard? Am I that contemptible? *Why*?"

For the first time in her two years with him, her therapist made an unequivocal recommendation. "You need something to get you outside yourself. I would consider cats."

With Virginia and Leonard in her apartment, things gradually improved. She still found herself crying with absurd regularity and even came to fear that she had exploded all the capillaries in her nostrils by blowing her nose too often; still, she felt a quiet joy pouring the milk for her kittens, or letting them lick clean the bowl of tuna fish she had used for her dinner sandwich. When the kittens got fleas, she had to toss them around in a pillowcase filled with a special powder and then shampoo them, surrendering her hands to their frantic wet claws.

She was again able to work on her dissertation without first reading over the entire file of her correspondences from Nico, and she began trying to brighten up her dreary little apartment. Borrowing a friend's sewing machine, she replaced her plastic blinds with floral swags. At a novelty store, she bought two wall sconces and a small brass box that said "matches." She decorated her refrigerator with Roz Chast cartoons, and she finally hung up an IRA poster that she had brought back from Belfast two years before. Then one weekend she drove out to an antiques store in Westville and bought an old chaise covered

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

with a threadbare brocade of pink silk: it made her think of the Empress Josephine reclined with a supple arm grasping her ankle in a painting by Ingres. The afternoon it was delivered, she wore her Dublin shawl, sipped tea, and read poetry with her toes curled beneath her. But when she was at her most content, she realized that she was seeing herself from outside, that the whole pose had been struck for the gaze of an absent man.

If there was any hope of truly getting over him, she would have to start dating. The question was how. Her life as a graduate student made her think of the tales of solitary confinement in bleak Russian novels. She examined the personals in *The Beacon*. Only one intrigued her: *Hamlet seeks Ophelia.*

She tried to socialize with her friends in other departments, but they were engulfed in their dissertations. One night she went bowling with two grad students, Daniel and his wife Linda. Celia hadn't gone bowling in years, but she still owned a pink ball from the time her father, unable to reconcile himself to the fact that she wasn't a boy, had signed her up in the East Kansas Junior League. She stood at the head of the lane, took tiny fretful steps, and clunked the ball down on the parquet. With a hand on her hip, she watched it edge toward the pins with a lugubrious inertia, and when the last pin had succumbed, she let out a little scream, "Whoa, doggie!" In Daniel's applause and smile she detected confirmation of her womanhood—she *was* such a good deal.

She went to Tweety's, a local club, and sipped daiquiris with her friend Leslie, a grad school dropout who was now trying to get into video production. Together they listened to the Brothers Kaye, a local band led by a pair of identical twins who had both been graduated from Harvard in the early eighties. Their sound was kind of Cat Stevensy, and Celia found herself staring at the drummer brother. After their set, she stunned herself by asking him to join her for a drink. As he sipped his beer, he removed a wedding band from the back pocket of his jeans and slipped it on his finger. "I take it off when I play," he explained, shyly. Celia flashed a wan smile.

She made slow progress on her thesis. Entire days passed during which she hardly spoke a word to anyone besides her

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cats. She strolled to the library not to do research, but to break up her day. She hoped to bump into acquaintances, but usually she just read literary magazines. On the cover of *The Journal of Signs* she noticed his name. She flipped to the article, "Bertrand Russell's Zealous Rationalism." Walking home, she let her steps lead her past the Semiotics department.

The light was burning in his office.

She stood frozen, then hustled away. The next day she contrived a meeting with her acquaintance in the department. "And I hear Nico Lowry's back in town," she casually mentioned.

"I heard that, too. I guess he just got back from his honeymoon. I haven't seen him, but I think he'll be at the Christmas party."

Celia's head bobbed in something like a nod. "So he finally married that manic-depressive?"

Her friend shook her head. "They broke up a while back. This is some German dancer—I heard she's also a head case."

Celia kept nodding, but all she heard was an immense thundering in her ears.

She had known insomnia like this before, so it no longer scared her. She prepared a more potent concoction of Tylenol and cognac, and stared at the silhouette of still branches on the ceiling. But it was as if her agitation charged the futon—her kittens were restless: mewing, shifting from side to side, and pawing the woolen blanket. Like a mantra she repeated to herself, *Let go*, but soon the words were just sound. She could have been saying, *Silly Putty, Silly Putty.*

It was the night of the grad students' Christmas party. She promised herself not to go, even as she applied her eyeliner and stepped into her miniskirt. Was that what Nico had meant when he had said that at the moment he slipped the condom in his back pocket he didn't believe they were going to have sex? The memory of that night made her flush, yet what lingered with her wasn't the passion, but his final act of withdrawal. Had it been one last mad gesture of fidelity, a perverse act of will and denial? More than anything, that brief inscrutable moment had left her feeling stunned and dirty.

The party was in the same vaulted hall with its mammoth unlit fireplace and dark wainscotting. Oscar Harrington was there in his faded tweed, a Scotch in hand. "I would imagine

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

you're close to completion," he said, holding his drink close to his chin. "I'd be delighted to see your most recent work . . ."

Nico Lowry was thinner, his hair a bit longer. Next to him stood a very small and slender woman with light blonde bangs and beautiful sad eyes that reminded Celia, incredibly, of her kittens'. And though Celia kept glaring at him from across the room, Nico remained in profile, fingering, as if by instinct, his earring.

She drugged herself to sleep. The next morning, she raced to the computer—it was as if she could dream his message. *More than anything I wanted to talk last night, but everything has been a mess, an impossible mess. What did Nietzsche say about the thought of suicide making life bearable? I won't even begin with the apologies; let me just say that however much you hate me, I hate myself more. And it may sound obscene, but I'd like to try to explain—would you meet me at Beca's for a cup of whatever you want?*

But the screen was blank. Celia climbed back into bed. Every hour or so she checked her e-mail. She felt vaguely drunk, unsteady. She despised him and her own weakness, yet she found herself seated before the computer. Her pulse raced and her hands trembled over the keyboard.

How could you behave so despicably? Don't you think I'm entitled to a word of explanation? Or was I just another grad student fuck?

Well? Too cowardly to respond?

Are you out there?

Suddenly she typed, *Countless times I've whispered your name in the black of night.*

She waited for a response. Her arms hung by her side. In the fleeting winter light, she could see her face reflected in the empty screen.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SUSAN BALÉE

Flannery O'Connor Resurrected

April 1994

Flannery O'Connor had some advice about trips to Atlanta: "Get in, get it over with and get out." I can only imagine how she would feel about the Atlanta International Airport in 1994. You can get in, all right, but getting out requires some doing, including a long ride on a computerized monorail, à la Disney World. Passengers separated from their luggage must worry about it, concourse after concourse, until the train finally deposits them at Baggage Claim. I try to picture Flannery negotiating all this on crutches, her hips disintegrated by lupus. "The lame shall enter first," she once observed wryly, "because the lame will be able to knock everyone else aside with their crutches!"

But Flannery O'Connor died before Atlanta—and its airport—grew to monstrous size. In fact, she's been dead since 1964, and it is the scholars, writers, and artists who have come to commemorate the thirty-year anniversary of her death who scuttle through these terminals in mid-April 1994, en route to Milledgeville, Georgia. Flannery's alma mater, Georgia College (once Georgia College for Women) is hosting "The Habit of Art," a four-day interdisciplinary tribute to Milledgeville's resident genius. Over five hundred people have paid $125 for the "full ticket" of events, and I am one of them.

My biography of Flannery O'Connor is due out from Chelsea House in August 1994. It will be the first biography of this Southern author ever published, and its audience will consist of young adults—an irony that would have made Flannery chuckle. She never intended any of her stories for young people and couldn't figure out why so much was made of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which she deemed "a nice book for children." Flannery, who also hooted with laughter

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

when Gene Kelly was selected to play Mr. Shiftlet in the TV dramatization of her story, "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," would probably bust a gut if she could see who introduces her first biography: Jerry Lewis. Lewis, as chairman of the Muscular Dystrophy Association, has written an introduction that appears in all the books in Chelsea House's series, "Great Achievers: Lives of the Physically Challenged." Flannery's co-celebrities in the Great Achievers series include athletes, Roman emperors, rock stars, painters, and scientists; *Flannery O'Connor* will wedge neatly between *Mary Tyler Moore* and *Itzhak Perlman* on library shelves.

Although I wrote this biography for money, I also wrote it with love. I've known Flannery O'Connor's work for a long time, at least since my ninth-grade English class in Jacksonville, Florida. Like Flannery, I knew how it felt to grow up Catholic in the Baptist South. And like Flannery, I grew up reading the tales of Edgar Allan Poe. For me, Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Katherine Anne Porter, Walker Percy, and Flannery O'Connor herself eventually followed. Southern literature not only gave me words for my own experiences, it ultimately helped me find a profession.

Therefore, when the chance came to write the biography, I thought it would be a cinch. Because I knew Flannery O'Connor's work, I thought I knew her as well. But I didn't. By the time I finished writing, I had more questions than answers about Flannery O'Connor's life. But the sources that could tell me what I longed to know more about—her relationship with her mother, her love life, her honest views on Southern race relations—were not and are not in the public domain. During my research in the summer of 1993, however, I found out who possesses the unpublished personal letters, and the journal that I suspect exists (for I have known of very few writers who didn't keep one). The personal documents I lacked reside with two people: Sally Fitzgerald, the authorized biographer, and Regina O'Connor, Flannery's ninety-eight-year-old mother.

Mrs. Fitzgerald has not yet brought forth her biography, though its arrival has been anticipated for over twenty years. Last summer, Frederick Asals, an eminent O'Connor scholar, wrote to me, "I have been expecting Sally Fitzgerald's biography for so long that I have stopped expecting." Meanwhile,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Mrs. O'Connor carries on, heading for her own centennial and our millennium, and remaining of sound mind and firm will. I think it is not too much to assume that there is a connection between Sally Fitzgerald's unborn biography and Regina O'Connor's unfinished life. I wonder if I will have the nerve to ask Sally Fitzgerald about that, or if she would even tell me. At any rate, we are scheduled to meet, and I am eager to interview this woman who was once Flannery's dearest friend.

But first I have to get to Milledgeville, a place I've written about but never seen, and a famous historic town in this state. Milledgeville was Georgia's capital until 1868, but a few years after The War Between the States—or "The Late Unpleasantness" as it's known down here—the capital moved to Atlanta. Nevertheless, in 1961, Flannery's letters record the (white) townsfolks merrily celebrating the centennial of "Secession" with parties and parades. Flannery herself hoisted a glass to Jefferson Davis. The conference begins on April 13 and the date strikes me—it was on April 12, 1861, that the Confederates fired on Fort Sumter and the Civil War began.

Another April, another spring, and I walk out of the airport into a high, hot blue day. It's been so long since I've been in the South, and for a moment I forget the forced weaning of my five-month-old son and simply inhale the bright air. I remember something Flannery wrote to a friend. "It's perhaps good and necessary to get away from [the South] physically for a while, but this is by no means to escape it. I stayed away from the time I was 20 until I was 25 with the notion that the life of my writing depended on my staying away. I would certainly have persisted in that delusion had I not got very ill and had to come home. The best of my writing has been done here." I realize that I have not come here for the academic part of this conference; I have no interest in putting on my scholar's cap and contributing to deconstructionist or new historical readings of Flannery's work. Instead, I have come to immerse myself in Flannery's home country—to see what she saw, to talk to the friends that she knew—to grasp somehow, finally, the truth of her life.

Here, in North Georgia, the median strips and trees are still light green and fresh-leaved. Spring is yet young, but by June's beating heat, all the deciduous plants will have darkened or

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

withered. But it hasn't happened yet, so I'm glad to accept the cone-green convertible Chrysler Le Baron that Thrifty Rent-A-Car offers me for the same price as a stodgy compact. I'm glad, at least, until I get the shiny beast up to full speed on I-285. At that point, I remember how much Flannery O'Connor always hated cars; she saw them as the quintessential American symbol of evil, and in *The Violent Bear It Away*, the devil appears driving a fancy sedan. Meanwhile, I am undergoing my own Purgatory trying to keep my linen blazer from blowing out of the car, my long hair from whipping my eyes, and the sun from frying my scalp. A worse nuisance, however, soon overtakes me. Every unreconstructed male on the highway finds it necessary to pull up beside me, and then to ogle, honk, wave, and hoot. I had forgotten: a big-bosomed, long-haired blonde with her car top down is more than their manhood can endure in silence. After an hour of this, I pull off and, in the parking lot of a Piggly Wiggly, I put the top up.

A little while later, when I turn onto U.S. 441 South, the two-lane highway to Milledgeville, the landscape of unbroken piney woods—shades of the murderous Misfit—gives way to domesticated fields. Orchards of pecans and peaches line the road. Red clay gashes the green fields, and cows graze in the pastures. Indeed, a sign welcomes me to "Georgia's Dairy Capital." Andalusia, the farm where Flannery moved with her mother in 1951, was a working dairy farm—Regina worked it, with no husband to help her. Vidalia onions and boiled peanuts are "4-Sale," as are the ubiquitous peaches and pecans. Christ is available everywhere and for free—at the Trinity Baptist Church, the Harmony Baptist Church, the Fountain of Praise Fellowship, the Morgan County Church of Christ, and several Bethany Baptist Churches. I am in the "Christ-haunted South," as Flannery called this place. I am in her homeland.

Besides Christ, the Civil War still haunts the South. A sign tells me that I'm on the "Antebellum Trail," but I haven't yet seen anything ante about 1950. Trailers, permanently moored, seem the dwelling of choice. A few tin-roofed shacks hang back from the road behind sagging fences; rusty tractors and balers stand useless beside weather-beaten barns. The occasional farmer in overalls graces the landscape, along with the occasional store—"Pettigrew's Beer, Ice, Groceries," "Brantley's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Marina & Guns"; restaurants appear here and there—"Hug's," the "Br'er Rabbit Tavern," the "Blue Crab Seafood," which has a life-sized Angus steer inexplicably adorning the roof. The Oconee National Forest blooms beside the highway for a few miles; dogwoods appear suddenly in a cloud of white blossoms amid the new-leaved deciduous trees; a fallow field of yellow wildflowers crops up between the farms and the forest.

I pass the Kountry Kollectibles store in Eatonton and I am in Alice Walker's hometown, a short hop from Milledgeville. Alice Walker said of Flannery O'Connor, "Her stories are about grace, not race," but I wonder. On Friday afternoon, according to my program, a panel called "O'Connor and Race" will convene in the Russell Auditorium of Georgia College. Four theologians—one of them black—will attempt to determine whether Flannery O'Connor was a racist. The South is not merely Christ-haunted, it is race-haunted too. I pass the Southern Boys Barbecue and then I'm in town. The relative sophistication of the town over the country immediately strikes me when I read a sign wheeled up to the highway. It says, "The harvest is plentiful, the reapers are few." I look behind it for a Baptist Church and see instead a real estate office.

The motel where I'm staying is newish but rundown. Gum stains the carpet, grout grips the mold in the bathroom, the shower head nearly flies out of the wall the first time I turn it on. I'm on the third floor and the walkway outside the rooms slants dangerously down toward the street. I'd like to know which Georgia boys put up this building and who got the kickbacks; mainly, I hope it isn't going to collapse from structural defects during the three days I'm staying in it. I have my husband and my two kids at home to think about, and think about them I do. It's late afternoon by the time I check into the motel and my breasts are engorged; I literally ache for the baby. I miss him so much I want to cry, and when I take a shower, my breasts cry for me: Milk runs down my body like tears, sweet and lost.

Nevertheless, I struggle into fresh clothes, climb back in the Chrysler, and drive downtown. Sally Fitzgerald told me that she would be staying in a historic house across from "the old Cline place"—Regina's family home, where Flannery spent her high school and college years—and that I should look her up for an

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

interview. I decide to try to find Sally before the "Celebration Mass" at 8 P.M. (Clyde Tipton's musical composition in honor of Flannery will be the first big event of the conference).

Dusk finds me wandering aimlessly down Greene Street. I pass the Old Governor's Mansion and recognize a site I wrote about but have never seen with my own eyes. Adjacent to the governor's gardens stands the house where Flannery spent so many years; a picture of it will be published in my biography. I have seen the picture and read Robert Fitzgerald's description of this antebellum mansion with its columns and porticos, but I am unprepared for the reality of what time has done to this edifice. I stop on the sidewalk before a decrepit house; its paint is peeling and its porch sags. A chain extends across the entrance to the porch with a sign warning off trespassers. I feel like I'm looking at Boo Radley's house, not Flannery's, and I am unutterably depressed.

A curtain flicks in a window upstairs and I know better than to keep loitering where visitors are not welcome. I turn on Liberty Street and wander past a dozen beautiful Georgian mansions; azaleas bloom against their white walls, and almost every house has a historic plaque commemorating it. But I'm lost and I don't remember which house Sally said she'd be staying in. I think she mentioned the "Bearden-Montgomery House," but I ring that doorbell and no one is home. Luckily, a middle-aged woman in a jogging suit appears on the sidewalk and, with Southern friendliness, asks me who I'm looking for. I tell her and she quickly sums up the possibilities. "If she's here for the conference, she's probably staying at Mara's Tara," she tells me. I have no idea what or where that is, but the woman offers to take me. We walk back past the ruined Cline mansion and my companion shakes her head. "It's a shame," she tells me, "but the Historic Society can't do a thing about private property. Some people say that Regina is just too old to see how bad the house looks, so she doesn't care about fixing it up."

"Is she living there?" I ask.

"She's there all right. Sick, though. Ailing. But sure, she lives in the house." She points to a dark car that's pulled up in front of the Cline house. "Those are Pinkerton guards," she says. "They're here for the conference. Regina doesn't want to be bothered by any visiting scholars or tourists."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She leads me up the steps of another large Georgian mansion, this one in mint condition. A sprightly woman in her late sixties is sitting on the porch having a drink and a smoke.

The friendly jogger introduces me and departs, and Rowena Mara and I begin to talk about Flannery O'Connor, Milledgeville, and other topics of related interest. I instantly realize that I'm in the presence of a master storyteller, and in about twenty minutes I know more about the history of Rowena's aristocratic ancestry than I would ever have thought possible. And she's as witty as can be—deadpan, as often as not. She keeps calling me "Miss Bidet," though I've told her it's *Balée* at least five times. At last she laughs, "The first time I saw a bidet in Paris I wondered what in tarnation it was. A footbath, I figured." Her eyes twinkle. "What's your name, again?"

"Here's Sally now," Rowena says at last, and I stand up. I'm not prepared for the woman who mounts the steps to Rowena Mara's bed and breakfast. Even though I know that over thirty years have passed since the letters collected in *The Habit of Being* were written, it is the Sally Fitzgerald of those letters whom I know. A Sally still in her thirties, with her cluster of babes around her, her marriage to Robert Fitzgerald still happy, intact. Time hasn't done to her what it's done to the Cline-O'Connor house, but it has altered Sally from the energetic young mother of the 1950s and early 1960s to a thin, grey woman in her seventies. Nevertheless, her voice thrills me with its clear melody, and a youthful vitality still shimmers out from her slender frame. I clasp her hand and am surprised by its dry strength.

Unfortunately for me, Sally has a dinner date with someone else and suggests that we meet the next day. Rowena then invites me to a restaurant with her and I'm delighted to accept. I hear more about her father, and her husband, Colonel Mara, both of whom were fine military men. In fact, Colonel Mara was graduated from Georgia Military Institute, right down the street from where we're having dinner. Rowena loves the military and particularly the Southern military hero—*the* Southern hero since the Civil War. I mention Sherman's visit to Milledgeville before he marched across Georgia, destroying everything in his path. "Honey, it wasn't Sherman done that damage," Rowena tells me. "He was an officer, and I never

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

knew an officer who wasn't a gentleman. Those vandals were foot soldiers. With a large army, you're gonna have the ragtag types—there's nothing you can do about it. People blame Sherman for burning Atlanta and tearing up the rest of the state, but *he* didn't do it. It was some of his soldiers, the dregs of the army."

By the time I've drained my iced tea to the dregs, it's time to gallop to Russell Auditorium for Clyde Tipton's "Celebration Mass." The place is packed, but I find a seat and the performance begins. It's a strange event—snippets of an actual Catholic mass mingled with music and narration by William Morgan, a Presbyterian minister (priests are obviously as hard to find in Milledgeville now as they were in Flannery's day). Julie Morgan (I wonder if she's related to the preacher) is the featured soprano, and she's good. She sings excerpts from writers and philosophers who influenced Flannery; I hear passages from T.S. Eliot's "Four Quartets," Teilhard de Chardin's "Hymn of the Universe," and part of a letter about the Holy Spirit that O'Connor wrote to T.R. Spivey. The Georgia College Concert Choir sings with the soprano on the refrains, and some of them also ring bells at regular intervals.

At one point, Clyde Tipton—who has the long hair and white beard of an Old Testament prophet—snaps up a violin and does a little fiddling. All I can think is, "Would Flannery O'Connor enjoy this?" I remember something she wrote to a friend: "I have the Original Tin Ear, that is to say, the First and Prime Tin Ear. So I like music that is guaranteed good because I have no way of finding out for myself. Old stuff like Haydn that there is positively no doubt about. On my own I wouldn't know it from Music to Clean Up By." So I guess she'd be pretty amused by this performance in her honor, but I think she'd like it too.

I slip out a bit before the end and head down Clark Street towards Greene, where my car is parked. Night-blooming honeysuckle perfumes the air, and I wonder what Sally Fitzgerald will tell me tomorrow about Flannery's love life. Gay Studies, ever on the lookout for new authors to induct, has been gazing recently at Flannery O'Connor. *Could she have been?* If so, she would join the ranks of Willa Cather and Elizabeth Bishop; she could become A Lesbian to Look Up To for young writers

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and scholars. My thought is, she *could* have been, but she wasn't. She had that intense correspondence with "A."—who gave Sally Fitzgerald her cache of letters on the condition that she remain anonymous—and I think A. may have been bisexual, but I don't think Flannery was worldly enough to recognize that kind of love. And in the end, it was not *eros*, but *agape* that she knew best.

Driving back up 441 to the motel, I realize I have to buy other shoes—the new ones I bought for the conference are martyring my feet. A Wal-Mart catches my eye and I park between two pickups outside its main entrance. It's 9 P.M. on a Wednesday night in Milledgeville, but the Wal-Mart is hopping. All of a sudden, I realize that *this* is Flannery O'Connor's Georgia. If she were alive and writing in 1994, this is where she'd be researching her characters. You want evangelists? Check out the Jehovah's Witnesses handing out copies of *The Watch Tower* by the front door. Looking for a tattooed man? Here's a shirtless one buying an electric drill. An enormous woman rifling through a rack of denim shorts directs me back to the Shoe Department. On the way there, I see both blacks and whites browsing among the clothes and accessories. In the shoe section, a mother and her teenage daughter are pulling out boxes, looking for "something in white." The teenage daughter is obviously pregnant and, from their conversation, I realize that she is trying to find shoes to go with her wedding gown.

That night I dream I have found a lump in one of my breasts. I rush to the mirror to examine it, fearful that I've discovered cancer. But the lump is lavender-hued and strangely sharp. I tug at it and pull out an azalea blossom. Another springs up behind it. Physically, the dream is reminding me of my absent baby, but spiritually the dream is telling me something I've felt ever since the plane touched down in Georgia: In my heart, I'm still a Southerner. And now I'm home again.

On Thursday morning, I make it down to Georgia College in time to hear Lee Smith read an excerpt from a new novel, tentatively titled "Paradise." The novel, about a snake-handling Christian sect in the Deep South, is absolutely hilarious. Smith has all of us laughing for an hour, and I rush to the conference bookshop to buy one of her books.

In the afternoon, I skip the scholarly panel, and wander

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

around the campus instead. I study the O'Connor-inspired art in Blackbridge Hall and lust after the $200 copy of Barry Moser's woodcut of Flannery's face. It's on all the conference paraphernalia and it really captures her essence. But I don't have $200. In fact, I hardly have $100 left, and it's possible I could spend all that on food for three days. I wander away and sit in the governor's gardens for a while. The back of Regina Cline O'Connor's house doesn't look as bad as the front. An old Cadillac sits back there—hers, no doubt.

Numerous Georgia College students troop by, in various states of undress. It's hot, and the kids are wearing shorts and T-shirts. They're a happy-looking bunch, and many of them are black. Times have changed since Flannery's day. She saw the first black students enter the college during the civil rights movement, but those were dark days in Georgia's history and many such students were harassed. These students look at ease. I left the South to go to graduate school in New York back in 1983 and there was still a great deal of unreconstructed racism among the white middle class. I hope it's changed and maybe—if these perky students are any indication—it has.

At five P.M., the time Sally Fitzgerald has given me for our meeting, I go back to Mara's Tara. On the porch, I meet Cecil Dawkins, an old friend of Flannery. She has a square, amiable face, short steel-grey hair, and an easy manner. She reminds me of an old athlete, still comfortable with her body. She's wearing loose-fitting cotton clothes, and though she left Alabama forty years ago (and now lives in New Mexico), she's still sporting a Birmingham accent. We begin to talk about Flannery and about writing and I'm struck by the intelligence of her remarks. I regret that I couldn't find any of her books in print, for she obviously knows the craft she's speaking of. And she's also obviously tired of having her work linked to her friendship with O'Connor. She is an important correspondent in *The Habit of Being*, and she did show Flannery many of her stories. "But I'd already written *three* stories before she ever saw my work," she tells me. "She was a great reader—none better—but I only sent her stories that I'd finished. She didn't revise them for me." I can understand why Cecil is irked. Most people nowadays know her primarily as a friend of O'Connor. It's not fair, but there it is.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Soon, Barry Moser and Louise "Molly" Westling, an important O'Connor scholar, join us on the porch. I tell Barry how much I loved the Flannery woodcut but that I couldn't afford a copy. "Oh," he says, "I'll give you one." Wonderful man—he leaps up, heads upstairs, and comes back with a copy signed to me. "What color were Flannery's eyes?" someone asks. "I think they were blue," Barry says, "although I only saw black-and-white photos of her. But she was Irish, so . . ." Cecil Dawkins shakes her head. "Her eyes were brown," she tells us. I look closely at Cecil; *her* eyes are brown. "Oh well," Barry says, "the print I did is black-and-white so it doesn't really matter." Molly Westling and I discover we're both from Jacksonville, Florida, and as we reminisce about the old town, Sally arrives home. Molly gives her a chair and I turn on my tape recorder.

I ask her about the men in Flannery's life. Sally had dropped tantalizing hints of love affairs in her Chronology in The Library of America edition of the collected works and I want to know. "Oh, Flannery had many boyfriends," she tells us. "She was a charming woman—certainly not the lonely wallflower that they were making her out to be at that scholarly session today. I knew her, she was lovely. She loved people." Cecil nods in agreement. "A. asked her if she'd ever known love," Sally went on, "and Flannery told her that she had known it *many* times." A small crease appears briefly between Cecil's eyes. "Men were just crazy about her," Sally continues. "John Sullivan here, Robie Macauley at Iowa."

"But Macauley was engaged, wasn't he?" I ask.

"Yes," she answers, "he was. But he admitted in his letters that he was dating her then. I have tracked down all of these people," she tells me. "I have met them, talked to them." She leans toward me. "But Flannery was a Catholic, and she knew she had lupus. She could never marry, for to bear children would kill her. She couldn't have done that, not with lupus. So that kind of a relationship with a man was not an option for her."

I begin to see Sally Fitzgerald's image of Flannery—a Catholic wedded to words, and through words, to Christ. A kind of literary nun, almost. I'm not sure I believe it. Flannery didn't find out she had lupus until she was well into her twenties; most girls of her age and station married much earlier than that.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I ask Sally about her six children and she names them off for me and what they're doing. Two are translators, one is a movie producer, one writes screenplays, another is a fiction writer. I can't keep track of them all, but it's lovely to see how proud Sally is of her successful brood. She begins to reminisce about the making of *Wise Blood*. One of her sons wrote the screenplay, another produced the film, and John Huston directed it. Sally herself was the costume designer and she found most of what she needed in Macon, Georgia, thriftshops. We all agree that it was a great movie.

We drift back in time to their days in Ridgefield, Connecticut, when Flannery was a boarder, and Sally remembers literary arguments over the dinner table. "Sometimes I would disagree with their interpretation of a story, but then Robert and Flannery would gang up on me. Oh, it used to make me mad!" But she laughs. I am utterly charmed by Sally Fitzgerald, even if she is beatifying Flannery O'Connor. After all, worse things could happen to a dead writer. "I can still hear your Southern accent on some words," I tell her. And I can; beneath the dignified Bostonian accent the Texan peeps out: she still pronounces ruin "rue-een," and children "chirren."

I have many more questions to ask, but we are startled by the sound of a shrieking cat. Rowena struggles up the steps holding a squirming tabby and blood spatters the porch. "The cat got hit by a car," Cecil says, "I heard it." Barry Moser interjects, "No, it's Rowena that's bleeding." Rowena's thumb is indeed dripping blood at a steady clip. "He bit me," she tells us. "I accidentally slammed his paw in the door and then I couldn't find my keys to unlock it. The poor thing bit me."

Barry rises quickly. "Let me help you put something on that finger."

"Oh, Rowena," Sally says, "that cat bit you. Maybe you'd better have it put down—what if it has rabies?"

"Rabies?" Rowena asks, bewildered. "Oh, no—he doesn't have rabies. He has *diabetes*."

Rowena, Barry, and Molly go indoors to work on Rowena's hurt hand, and Sally shivers. "Cats," she says. "I don't like cats. Whenever I visit A., I can't stand all her cats."

This makes me think of other things I want to ask her, but it's time to go to a reception at the town library down the street.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Cecil drives Sally and me over to the Mary Vinson Memorial Library. Upstairs, on the main floor of the library, a friend calls Sally over and Cecil and I are left to fill our plates together. We spear a few appetizers and let the servers spoon dollops of chicken casserole on our plates and then we lean against a counter to talk and eat. "I don't think I agree with what Sally said about Flannery's love life," Cecil tells me. "I don't think Flannery had all those boyfriends. I don't think she knew anything about men, or about sex either. She just didn't know about things like that. She was a Catholic and she'd lived a sheltered life. And she lived with Regina."

"What was Regina like?" I ask. I've been dying to know and no one has ever really said. Flannery's contemporaries keep describing Regina as "full of energy," which may be true but also sounds like a euphemism for something else.

"Regina was full of energy," Cecil tells me.

Another friend of Flannery overhears and comments: "Regina's personality was just like the mother in the stories. Just like those mothers."

I think of Hulga's mother and of all the other tough-minded single mothers in Flannery's stories. They are materialistic women, those characters; they are frequently spiritually blind as well as annoyingly self-righteous. They aren't often admirable characters, but they ring true. When I wrote the biography, I had the idea that those women were modelled on Regina, but I couldn't comment on what I didn't know for sure. And no one has ever really described Flannery's mother in print. Regina O'Connor is, after all, still alive. I wonder if Sally Fitzgerald's biography will render an accurate portrait of that mother/daughter relationship, and I wonder if that's the real reason she has never published it? She doesn't want to hurt Regina. Sally's sense of delicacy struck me during our brief interview; she has no desire to wound anyone, only to protect.

Cecil changes the subject. "I think it's ridiculous that people are so interested in writers' sex lives. Who cares about their sex lives? It's their work that matters."

"But people do care," I say. "They want to know. I think that Sally is trying to defend Flannery from the recent contention that she might have been a lesbian."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Cecil snorts. "She wasn't a lesbian," she says. "She just didn't know a thing about sex. She didn't know *what* she was."

I think that most people have a pretty good idea of "what they are" by the time they're in their teens, but I also believe that Flannery was innocent in many ways. Not naive, just innocent. When I read *The Habit of Being*, I thought that A. might have been prodding Flannery toward some deeper articulation of her sexuality, but it's impossible to tell from just Flannery's half of the correspondence. I mention something like this to Cecil.

"A. is a manic-depressive," she tells me. "I wish she would have gotten on lithium a long time ago—I think it would have helped her. She used to get crushes on writers and she did write brilliant letters. She had a crush on Flannery, one on Iris Murdoch, and later she got one on me."

"Do you still correspond?" I ask, surprised.

"Oh, no," Cecil laughs. "Her letters got too strange. When she told me she was writing poems about her father's penis, I figured it was time to end the correspondence. But she was very smart, in her way. And her letters were absolutely brilliant."

Two women come up to talk to Cecil; they know and love her books—*The Quiet Enemy, The Live Goat*, etc.—and I feel stupid again that I haven't read any of them. I have made mental notes of all the titles, though; I'll find them in the used bookstores back in Philadelphia.

I leave the reception early and walk back up the street to the Georgia College campus. That night, I attend the Leo Kottke concert. He says of his link to Flannery: "It was the barbed wire that kept me going." Hazel Motes, the evangelist hero of *Wise Blood*, wraps himself in barbed wire as penance for his sins.

The next morning, I am at the Russell Auditorium hunting for Stan Lindberg, the editor of *The Georgia Review*. We have a lunch date, and he is also going to introduce me to Louise Erdrich, a featured speaker and one of my favorite novelists. She is, many people think, the heiress of Flannery's style—another writer who merges humor and tragedy and comes up with "the grotesque." In return for the introduction, Stan has asked me to identify Erdrich in my article on the conference as "an Advisory and Contributing Editor to *The Georgia Review*, which—not surprisingly, given its status in American letters—

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

has published several of her finest pieces." I have agreed to use his exact words. I finally find him and he is as good as his pledge: he introduces me to Louise Erdrich and I think she must be one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen, better-looking in person than on her book jackets. She too reads an excellent portion of a new novel, and after an hour-long book signing session, a number of us head out to lunch at the Southern Café. It's Southern all right—a cafeteria-style place serving collard greens, chicken and dumplings, biscuits, and fat sausages. Not the kind of place I would think to take a visiting writer, but Erdrich doesn't seem to mind.

After lunch, I hurry to the session on "O'Connor and Race." As I had suspected, it turns out to be the most revealing of all the conference sessions. Ralph Wood, the theologian whose paper opens the session, describes a new collection of O'Connor letters recently donated to Georgia College. These are more letters from Maryat Lee, the sister of the former college president, and Flannery's good friend. The letters, according to Wood, reveal that Flannery was in fact a racist. In the letters, Flannery wrangles with Maryat—a confirmed liberal—over race relations. When Maryat requests that Flannery write a public letter on the race question, the Milledgeville prophet snorts. Then she says that though she believes in integration as "a moral ideal," she doesn't really like black people, particularly not "the new kind." Wood laments this, but says that her personal opinions never contaminated her art—she portrays blacks fairly in her stories, and often ennobles them far above the white characters. Three theologians respond to Wood's paper, and one of them is Willie Jennings, a black Doctor of Divinity. Indeed, Jennings is the *only* black person at the conference—a fact that may say more about Flannery's work and its reception than any of the words being thrown about by the participants.

Jennings, like all the others, must conclude that Flannery was indeed a racist, but he wisely notes that such a question is too simplistic; "racism" is too narrow a category. "She was not stronger than the Jim Crow South," he notes, "but she was not chained to it." Another theologian, Henry Russell, observes that "Flannery will be vilified as her views are made better known," but he wonders why we must bandy about terms that

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

damn authors, terms like "racism," "homophobia." What's the point? he asks. "It's disturbing to hear that Flannery doesn't like black people," he says, "but it's obvious that she didn't much like white people either."

The session runs way too long, but I have been mesmerized by it. Afterwards, I'm amazed to hear people speaking angrily about that panel, about how the theologians tried to make Flannery out to be a racist, to ruin her reputation. I had not thought that at all; I felt they all tried to say that Flannery could not rise above her cultural milieu, her time and place. For it's true that if we turn politically-correct eyes on white Southern writers of thirty and more years ago, not one of them will measure up. That session, for me, remains the most important part of the conference.

That night I listen to Joyce Carol Oates read a story from *Heat*, but I skip the book-signing line and go instead to the Governor's Mansion to see Flannery's paintings on display. Because I also draw and paint, I have been looking forward all week to this exhibit. But the paintings are roped off from the visitors, signs warn us not to take photos, and dark-suited men stand around ominously. You would think we were looking at the Mona Lisa, but we're not. And I am disappointed in Flannery's paintings—they are amateurish renderings of birds, for the most part, and the years have muddied the colors. Thank God for the books, I think. Time cannot muddy those fine sentences, those striking metaphors. Flannery wanted to be a painter, but she was really a writer. And as a writer, she wanted to be a novelist, but she was really a first-rate short-story writer. Sally Fitzgerald would not agree with that, but Cecil Dawkins would.

On Saturday morning, I finally hear Cecil Dawkins read, and her story is the best one out of all the famous authors who have graced the conference. I am stunned by how good "The Quiet Enemy" is—and by the fact that Cecil's writing owes nothing to Flannery O'Connor. I recognize no similarity between them other than brilliance. The audience claps long and appreciatively when her tale is done and I rush down the aisle to shake her hand before she's swamped by fans. Her brown eyes gleam triumphantly; she's good and she knows it, and now we know it too.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The last event I attend is Sally Fitzgerald's talk about Flannery's friendships. She is candid about herself, notes that she is aging but still "viable," and then she raps the knuckles of scholars (I think of the theologians) who "venture opinions on the letters without knowing everything about them," for they "will come up with wrong answers." No doubt she's right, but that's all the more reason why she should bring out her biography and set the record straight. Sally's talk focuses again on Flannery's many relationships with men, but this version of Flannery is that of the unrequited lover. She "endured" being in love, again and again, but was not loved in return. Flannery emerges from this treatment as a kind of martyr to love—ennobled by loss. She turned to words, and her loss became our gain.

The conference is almost over and I am thinking of the flight home to my husband and children. My breasts don't hurt much anymore for I'm losing my milk. Time has done that; time and absence. Claire Shepard, a Milledgeville English teacher who has become my boon companion for the last two days of the conference, takes me to the Memory Hill Cemetery. I want to visit Flannery's grave; I want to get closure on her life, and that is where her life closed. Her grave is marked by a flat tombstone surrounded by gravel; it's near a steel fence, at the edge of the cemetery that gives onto Franklin Street. There's nothing romantic about her grave, but here it is. Claire and I sit beside it and I make a sketch of the stone, of her name and dates and parentage.

Two blocks away, Regina O'Connor rests in her crumbling house on Greene Street. Her tombstone is yet uncarved, for she has outlived her daughter by thirty years. A twist on the natural order of things. Our children are the seeds we plant for the future, to flower after we are gone. I feel suddenly sorry for Regina, this iron-willed woman whom I will never meet. Claire likes my drawing and asks if she can have a copy of it. "Sure," I tell her, though it's not even an accurate rendering of the stone—I've made the writing too big for the rectangle. But I guess it's my version of reality, and that's all we're ever left with anyway. For if I have learned anything at this Flannery O'Connor conference, I have learned that there are many versions of the truth. And each one rings true to the teller.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

JOSIAH FISK

The New Simplicity: The Music of Górecki, Tavener and Pärt

I

For the past thousand years, Western music has drawn its strength from ambiguity. No sooner is the first gesture laid before us—be it the opening phrase of a Gregorian chant, the subject of a Baroque fugue, the crunch of a dissonant tone cluster—than it begins to extend and transform itself, to amend, to shade, to counterbalance, to reassert, to contradict.

That's why we listen: so our ears can make sense out of what we're hearing. That note—did it signal the end of a phrase or the beginning of a new one? Is this theme fully formed the first time it appears, or does it achieve its real identity only after metamorphosis? Is that triad the tonic or is it the dominant of the subdominant? (Same notes, different context and function.)

In their written form, questions like these seem dry and impenetrable, the exclusive province of the musically trained. But you don't need training to hear their *effect*. These questions present themselves directly within the music—in a sense, present themselves *as* the music. And it is the ambiguous nature of these questions, the fact that we can perceive them but not resolve them, that provides music with its perpetual ability to engage our ears, our minds, and most especially our hearts.

Like the best examples of any art form, the best works of Western music seem actually to be alive, richly animated with a sentience that responds to a hundred different probings of the ear and the intellect. These works carry meanings within themselves, presenting them to us in all their cross-grained complexity as their stories unfold. They do that most human of things: they approach you, greet you, and proceed to engage you in dialogue.

Even the musical revolutions of the early twentieth century,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dramatic as they were, never challenged the basic principles of musical dialogue. It's true that Schoenberg, lately tagged as the man who made music listener-unfriendly, wrapped his later works in barbed wire. But those with ears sharp enough to cut the wire soon discovered that inside there was a heart and a brain, along with no small amount of traditional expertise and values.

Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Bartok, Ives—all "Modernists"—made a brave show of their independence from what they considered to be a hidebound past. They injected their art with that most Modernist of all qualities: ironic detachment. But they always paid close attention to the past, and for the most part they held it in the highest respect. In their studios they toiled as hard as their predecessors had, and at many of the same labors.

What they did do was to broadcast an attitude. As a means of winning attention and gaining a foothold for their ideas, it was very successful. But it had an unintended consequence: it disrupted the old contract between artist and audience. Confronted with music that sounded like nonsense from artists of rebellious pose, most listeners turned away and never came back. As it happened, the radicalism of the Modernists was more extreme on the surface (and in the accompanying rhetoric) than in the deeper realms. But the surface and the rhetoric were about as far as most people got. They didn't hang around long enough to see the traditional elements within the new music.

And they certainly didn't hang around long enough to see just how ambitious the movement's goals were. Modernism was truly going to change the world: it was going to be the force that freed us from the weight of history. In this it failed spectacularly, at least on the terms it had set forth. What Modernism had envisioned was a reinvention of ourselves and our culture based upon the lessons of history. It achieved some form of freedom from history all right, but not the one it wanted, and not at the price it was expecting to pay.

What Modernism achieved was a disconnection from the past—a disconnection based on hubristic ignorance. This may seem an odd argument to make, since Modernism was launched by artists who had thorough traditional trainings.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Moreover, their trainings encompassed both technique and intellectualism. The first musical Modernists learned not only the carpentry of music, but the architecture, the logic, the philosophical and discursive underpinnings. It's no coincidence that all four of the composers named above created masterpieces that were more or less in a received style before striking out on their own.

So where is the disconnection? It lies between the Modernists and their successors. For one generation, Modernism was a new art managed by old hands. Subsequent generations, born too late to witness the youthful discipline of the first generation of Modernists, saw only the cultivated radicalism of their maturity. And it was radicalism, rather than strict classical tradition (which by then was centuries old), on which many of Modernism's descendants were weaned.

Thus the children of Modernism were, in a cultural sense, children of immigrants. Having been brought safely to the shores of the contemporary world, they could choose to view the struggles of history with nostalgic dismissal: photos in the ancestral scrapbook, to be taken out and chuckled over every now and again, then put away and forgotten until the next time. They could imagine themselves beyond the reach of history. They could, if they wanted, feel excused from understanding the past, or from heeding its lessons. From history's viewpoint, the Modernists may have been excellent artists, but they were disastrous parents.

Of course, we still have a certain consciousness of history, one that in many ways is far stronger than those of earlier times. More than any previous age, we keep all the various musics of the past readily on hand. But for the most part we keep them as we keep those other photos in our scrapbook—as artifacts that feel familiar, yet which we have rarely bothered to examine with the goal of understanding them. The classical music in our world is likely to be decoration or background, or a tool for snobbishly asserting one's good taste.

From a culture-wide perspective, we tend to see classical music as tame and reassuring, conservative and safe, as nothing more consequential than prettiness. Or we bypass the music itself altogether, the better to probe the circumstances of its creation for any taint of cultural politics. And in all of these

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cases we get the nature of the art exactly wrong. We remain blissfully ignorant of the dialogues, the ambiguities, the deeply questioning and even subversive powers that actually govern the operation of music, and that still blaze away below the soft, familiar surfaces of the classical masterpieces.

II

From the failure to recognize the inner life of old music to the writing of new music that has no inner life is but a small step. A tempting step, too, if you are a composer, since it offers so many advantages. You need not know history except to raid it for material and to find isolated similarities between the older masters and yourself that will help you portray yourself as their heir. You need not feel the breath of those masters upon your neck, as Brahms so keenly felt Beethoven's when striving to write his first symphony, because unlike Brahms you are not fully cognizant of the extent of your predecessors' accomplishments. You need not bother to master the tedious disciplines of counterpoint, harmony, figured bass, analysis. And you need not ponder the sensitivities, whether musical, esthetic or otherwise, that gave rise to those disciplines. You get to reinvent music any way you please. You are free to take or to leave, to set your own goals, to make your own rules.

John Cage, with his chance-determined pieces and his all-sound-is-music philosophy, was the first to tread this path. He did it knowingly and gleefully—first as a lark, and later, trapped by success, with a seriousness that kept growing while effectiveness dwindled.

Cage was always too artsy for the wider public, who couldn't see the fun in music that advertised its intent to defraud and then made good on the promise. But he did win attention within the cosmopolitan culture-world by capitalizing on the rift that separated the Babbitt/Boulez school of composers (the so-called Post-War Serialists) from the art-music audiences of mid-century.

The Serialists were Modernism's "good children" in the sense that they not only believed in the value of history's knowledge, but wanted to extend it further. From the average listener's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

standpoint, that was exactly the problem. In their zeal, the Serialists constructed music that was abstract (lacking in the traditional "objects" of music, such as melody) and was vastly elaborate in the bargain. It was music for virtuoso listeners, and it couldn't have come at a less auspicious time. Far from being ready to expand their listening powers, mainstream classical audiences were beginning to lose touch with the inner life of the music they already knew. Between the lulling effect of masterwork repetition and the demise of music-making as a pastime (speeded by radio and recordings), listeners expected comfort. Modernism offered only challenge.

Knowing that most people, even many musicians, couldn't actually hear the structures within Serialist works, Cage concocted music that sounded just as "complex" but was based on sheer randomness. In doing so, he slyly put over the syllogism that musical structure was *always* unhearable. And if it was unhearable, then it was unnecessary.

The days when Cage's music carried automatic shock value are long past. But many do still bear him a grudge for other reasons. It wasn't just that Cage was musically incompetent—that much he cheerfully admitted. It was that he insisted his incompetence was as valid as anyone else's skill. Implicitly, Cage was asserting that if he couldn't hear something, it wasn't there. It was an attitude tailor-made to twentieth-century sensibilities: the substitution of personality for ability, the cultivation of ignorance behind a shield of arrogance.

Many of Cage's admirers never did get much from the music (in a way, that too was part of his appeal: you could skip the performance and still get an idea of the piece from a 25-word description). For all his celebrity, and for all his reputation as one of the century's great pioneers and door-openers, Cage the composer has surprisingly few heirs. But Cage the promoter of an artistic posture, the liberator of music from the chains of knowledge and technique, the enshriner of Everything Is Art—*that* Cage has had an influence that can be detected in many places, including areas of music far removed from his own.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

III

When you first listen to Henryk Górecki's Symphony No. 3, Cage is hardly the first reference that comes to mind. An orchestra plays unadventurously melodic material. A soprano sings traditional texts of lament. The beat and the key are always clear, and they continue unchanged for long periods. While Cage attempted to eliminate the communication of intention by using techniques like chance operations, Górecki's symphony is abundantly explicit in its communication of the artist's intentions. Not only are the music and texts obvious in their emotional cast (all three movements are slow and sad), but the work comes with a subtitle that clues us in from the start: "Symphony of Sorrowful Songs." The composer, a sixty-one-year-old Pole known for his reticence, speaks of influences like religion, folk culture and ancient chants—things far removed from Cage's urban-culture world.

And then there is the matter of the Górecki's phenomenal sales. Released in June of 1992, the Zinman/Upshaw/London Sinfonietta recording (Nonesuch) spent the next eight months at the top of *Billboard* magazine's classical sales chart, and was somewhere within that chart's top ten for the better part of two years. No other composer has ever had a number-one recording on the classical chart while he or she was alive. In Britain, the Nonesuch recording sold so well that it briefly held a spot on that country's pop charts, rising as high as No. 6. It has twice been picked up for the soundtrack of a commercial film. As of this summer, worldwide sales were running in excess of 750,000 units. It's hard to imagine John Cage daring to dream of a success like that.

Here the differences between the composers end, however, and the stronger, deeper similarities begin. The listener who approaches the Górecki Symphony No. 3 with the idea of discovering its inner life quickly runs into a hard realization: There isn't any inner life. The monochrome textures of the music's surface are not merely the skin enveloping other layers of thought; they are the only layer. All things are just what they sound like, no more and no less. It is music without ambiguity, music without dialogue.

There is an easy way to see this, and that way is to do a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

modest bit of comparative analysis. Set the Górecki third next to another classical piece. Almost any piece will do: a Medieval motet, an obscure Czech tone poem, *The Four Seasons*, a Sousa march. The comparison doesn't need to go beyond the opening ideas, and although it may require a certain amount of close attention, it doesn't have to be complex or technical. As an example, I offer the following comparison, no more than a few paragraphs long and understandable without musical training.

For the sake of familiarity, the music in this example is something universally known: the opening of Beethoven's Symphony No. 5. The object is not to show that Górecki isn't Beethoven—not only would that be pointless, but this analysis doesn't begin to address what makes Beethoven great as opposed to competent. Rather, the object is to show just how far Górecki's music is from being "classical" in the sense that the term has come to be defined over the past millennium.

To make the comparison as simple as possible, I'll narrow the definition of dialogue. Beethoven's fifth, like most classical works, contains any number of dialogues within it—between ideas, between form and content, between the composer and history, to name only a few. This comparison will look at just one form of dialogue: the interplay between the listener's expectations and the actual path the work takes. To put it another way: the pattern of the frustration and the satisfaction of desires, as well as how the music stimulates and manipulates those desires.

Beethoven begins with material of the crudest simplicity, and initially he uses it to establish an equally simple pattern. Four-note gesture, pause, same gesture a scale-degree lower. But already your ear has been teased, because the piece has given you two conflicting expectations. One is what might be called the expectation of the "naïve ear." This ear always assumes the obvious, which in this case would be the continuation of the pattern: a third repetition of the gesture, again a step down. But another part of the ear—call it the "experienced ear"—senses that this would be too obvious. It may even sense that a third repetition would, in this case, convey such a feeling of finality that the piece would be over before it began (in musical terms, the melody and harmony would both arrive at the tonic, and would do so on the downbeat). The experienced ear assumes the pattern will be broken. What it doesn't know is how.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"How" turns out to be very shrewd. Cognizant of the crossed expectations he has created, Beethoven partially satisfies both. He gives the naïve ear the repeated rhythmic pattern and the tonic harmony it was expecting. In recognition of the experienced ear, he changes the melodic shape (avoiding the tonic in the melody) and also the dynamic, pulling back from loud to soft. And then he bounds ahead of both ears by extending the rhythm into a string of repetitions that propels the piece into motion. Some answers, more questions. Some expectations met, others denied, still others changed and redirected. It's logical, but also irrational. It's solidly intellectual and at the same time seductively playful. It engages the ear and the mind, but always with the purpose of speaking to the heart.

Like Beethoven, Górecki starts with manifestly simple material, and like Beethoven he uses it to establish a simple pattern. The string basses play a long melody; the melody is then taken up by other strings at a higher pitch, as a canon. And here the similarity to Beethoven or any other classical composer ends, because Górecki's canon simply continues as it began, with higher and higher voices adding themselves to the pile. He doesn't alter the initial pattern. He fulfills the expectation of the naïve ear and calls it a day.

What about the musical content of the canon? Here too the listener is sent away empty. Rather than any perceptible form of interaction among the voices of the canon—any mutual acknowledgement—there are merely simultaneous monologues. The composer has scrupulously followed the basic specifications for a canon, taking a musical line and overlapping it with itself at regular intervals, but has ignored the principles which give the form interest and life. Not by coincidence, these are also the principles that require far greater skill and effort to satisfy.

The resulting music is still a canon, but in name only. The voices, as they overlap, do not create a pattern of meaning. What is left are the bare rudiments of the form, which Górecki uses as a rather primitive mechanical means of building and then unbuilding a sonic texture. It is this texture that offers the music's one communication: a tide of undifferentiated emotionalism. In all other potential aspects of communication, the piece is essentially mute. It has an absence of communication that surpasses Cage's own efforts in that direction.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The segment of the Górecki used in this comparison lasts more than 12 minutes (the canon rises, then falls, leading to a contrasting middle section). The portion of the Beethoven takes approximately 12 seconds, and in terms of identifiable musical content much more occurs in that period than in the 12 minutes of the Górecki. The argument usually advanced for Górecki is that he's more interested in emotional content than musical content. Does one preclude the other? If so, it would suggest that Beethoven had to make the fifth symphony less emotionally communicative in order to gain substance and complexity—not a very persuasive thesis, for Beethoven or for any composer of more than middling repute. In classical music, the relationship between emotional strength and musical substance is positive, not inverse. For most composers, and for many listeners, emotional content and musical content are not only intertwined, but identical.

IV

That Górecki's music has no inner life is not news to the composer or his more alert followers. Nor is it news to the two other composers whose names have increasingly become linked with Górecki's of late: the Englishman John Tavener and the Estonian-born Arvo Pärt. These three are the most visible exponents of what might be called the New Simplicity. The absence of inherent musical substance in their compositions is intentional. In the New Simplicity, the development of ideas in the manner of Western classical music is carefully avoided, the stated goal being the attainment of a simplicity and "purity" of musical material and character.

Pärt's music, especially that composed since the late 1970s, achieves simplicity through the use of rules that are tightly constricting but are also essentially arbitrary. Pärt's *Passio* (1982) is a setting of St. John's version of the Passion story in which each vocal part moves among its same few pre-allotted notes for the entire 70 minutes. All voices move together in the same rhythm, and all the rhythms are built from the same few basic cells. Thus the piece sounds remarkably consistent from

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

beginning to end; what comes out of your CD player on "Scan" is not much different from what comes out on "Play."

In Pärt's *Festina Lente*, according to the recording booklet, "The sacred numbers three and seven determine the work's structure . . . The three groups of instruments . . . play the melody seven times at three different tempos" (substitute numbers from the I Ching for those blessed by God and you have Cage). Pärt's regard for the naïve ear is at least as high as Górecki's; in another Bible-based work, *Sarah Was Ninety Years Old*, he devotes long minutes to the obsessive repetition of an extremely simple four-beat sequence on a drum. The tempo is slow and there is a pause between each iteration. No other sound is being made. Yet Pärt evidently considers the sequence fascinating, since he brings it back again and again, with only the most elementary variations.

Tavener's best-known work is *The Protecting Veil*, a 45-minute piece for solo cello and orchestra composed in 1987; the Virgin recording with cellist Steven Isserlis sold well for many months following its release. In the notes to the recording, Tavener explains that the name of the work derives from a vision seen by the "holy fool" Andrew and his disciple in tenth-century Constantinople. In the vision, Mary spreads her Veil as a protective shelter for the Greeks against their Saracen invaders. The cello plays long, meandering lines, mostly in its extreme high register. The orchestra, with the infinite patience characteristic of the New Simplicity, gradually parcels out a series of fairly elementary ideas, holding each before our ears for extended contemplation before moving on to the next. The modest interest that inheres in Tavener's material (there's more than either of his peers usually offers) is leached away by this pacing.

The three composers have very different individual identities. Górecki evinces a gritty nationalism, depressive and unremitting in spite of its flower-in-the-tank-barrel affirmations of humanity. Pärt's music gives much the same feeling of being a response to totalitarianism, but for him the answer is a withdrawal from the here and now through a self-styled form of monkish transcendence. Tavener has the most proficient ear and appears to have absorbed the most musical training; his works have a degree of sophistication that the other two, Górecki in particular, have tried to make a virtue of lacking.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In addition to sharing some esthetic and technical predilections, all three composers tend to indulge in, or to invite, philosophizing and explication. Sometimes this is a way of entering special pleas on behalf of the music. In other cases, the words are sent to do the heavy lifting that the music can't do itself. In either case, the music ends up coming to us in a protective coating of extraneous ideas. In some cases, the words come from the composers themselves; in other cases, they come from people evidently known to the composers and speaking with some degree of knowledge and authority, if not the composer's outright approval. In all cases, the words seem as much as anything to be trying to foreclose on critical assaults by vacating the premises in advance.

One example is Michael Stewart's notes for *The Protecting Veil* CD, which tell us that in place of the "Western concept of traditional musical development" we must expect an Eastern-looking "development of another kind, that which operates on a purely spiritual and metaphysical level." How the music gains the ability to communicate this spiritual development Stewart does not say. Wolfgang Sandner, in the notes to the ECM CD of Pärt's *Tabula Rasa*, loftily writes that Pärt's "is an attempt to fathom what is secret and unknowable, and he is aware that this will be revealed to him in untranslatable musical terms, if at all." Here we are not only asked to take the aspiration for the deed, but are warned that the aspiration itself may fail.

Words also play a role in this music as texts. Yet the purpose of these texts is often not the normal one, which is to convey specific meaning. Instead, they are incantatory. Once again, the meaning we are expected to receive is not inherent, but circumstantial. The salient aspect of the text used in the second movement of the Górecki symphony is not the text itself but the tragic circumstances of its creation: it was scrawled on the wall of a Gestapo prison cell by a teenage Polish Catholic girl who presumably died not long afterwards.

Even in circumstances where words would seem to be strictly informational, they sometimes turn out to be incantations. Does it help us to understand Tavener's *The Whale* a little better to know, as the composer informs us, that he once went to Cornwall during the winter to see an actual whale, without success? Does it help us to know, as the notes in the Nonesuch

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Górecki third somberly inform us, that the words of that poor girl's prayer were scratched on a certain wall number in a certain cell, when we don't know how the cells and walls are numbered? Though details are the stuff of information, these details are not here for informational purposes. They are here to insert the element of ritual homage, the deliberate focusing on facts that are irrelevant because they have been shorn of all context. This, for the New Simplicity, is a form of substance and depth. These details are the verbal analogues to the pitches in Górecki's canon: meaningless as information (because we cannot connect them to anything), but effective in stimulating emotionalism.

V

As ought to be apparent by this point, it's hard to get very far into the New Simplicity without encountering religious aspects. Pärt adopted a strong religious stance relatively early in life, a personal and relatively free-form mixture of Western Medieval and Eastern asceticism, and virtually all his mature works and his statements center on his beliefs. Tavener had something of a bad-boy youth; *The Whale* (1969), a sonic-collage in the then-fashionable style, was issued by the Beatles' Apple Records. Since then he has had a change of heart, converting to Eastern Orthodoxy and placing himself in its service as a composer. Górecki's devout Catholicism has been lifelong and is much less exotic, so it isn't surprising that it is only one of the anchors of his approach, sharing that duty with the ancient Polish nationalist influences. But on the musical side Górecki, too, experienced something similar to a conversion, abandoning his early mentors, the Serialist Anton Webern and the avant-garde "engaged" leftist Luigi Nono, in favor of simpler techniques.

With the religious aspect we get closer to the nub of the problem. We are asked to accept that the New Simplists' elimination of the play of ideas in music isn't born of highhandedness, confusion or lack of ability. It is authorized by powers far beyond human comprehension. Their ignorance of musical wisdom is indeed deliberate, but justified, because it is nobly wrapped in the Spartan robe of self-denial.

This may be a form of religiosity, but it is neither Eastern nor

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Medieval. In some ways it is closer to New Age spiritualism, with its intellectual flabbiness and fuzzy blend of platitudes from miscellaneous sources. New Age thinking values ritual over intelligent action, superstition over knowledge and logic. In psychological terms, it is founded on denial.

But even more than New Age, what the New Simplicity resembles is fundamentalism. It aims to return us to "simpler times." It invokes higher authority. It casts itself as the force of good that is fighting off evil. It attempts to be self-consistent and closed. It prizes austerity. It takes offense at playfulness. It demands unquestioning acceptance. It has shown up at a time of confusion with The Answer. It is utterly devoid of humor or irony—a main point of difference with the Soviet religious-influenced composers like Sofia Gubaidulina and Alfred Schnittke (who have always attempted to give their music at least a modicum of inner life) as well as with the Minimalists like Philip Glass and Steve Reich. It turns all opinions to its support: if you like this music, it's because you perceive its simple beauty; if you criticize it, it's because you are blinkered or elitist.

And it involves a highly selective approach to knowledge. Adrian Thomas, for example, refers in his CD notes for Górecki's "*Lerchenmusik*" to specific works of Beethoven, Brahms and Messiaen. Yet somehow he has managed to overlook the vast wealth of internal relationships, the entire body of principles upon which the music of those three composers is built, since he is blithely able to place Górecki in their company. In order to do this—in order to believe that the New Simplicity is an extension of Western classical tradition—it is necessary to believe that superficial resemblances, such as the names of the pieces and the instruments called for, are more important than fundamental oppositions. It is necessary to be oblivious of nearly everything the classical music tradition has stood for in all its ten centuries.

What makes this musical fundamentalism as tiresome as most other varieties is that like all fundamentalists, the New Simplists keep giving the game away without realizing it. They present themselves as legitimate heirs to the Western classical tradition, even quote bits of Chopin and Beethoven in their music, yet they make a point of refusing to "indulge" in any of the tradition's defining beliefs or practices. They offer their music

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

as a humanizing antidote to the forces of repression (whether musical, technological or political), yet their music forces a single interpretative possibility onto the listener with totalitarian efficiency. They spurn the intellectual dimensions of music, yet they try to establish the legitimacy of their own efforts through intellectual arguments. And they (and their followers) talk in a doublespeak that fails to conceal the obtuseness and absurdity of much of their thinking.

Thus the CD notes tell us that Tavener's *Celtic Requiem* "begins unconventionally, with an extremely quiet chord of E-flat major," when in fact a quiet chord is one of the most perfectly conventional beginnings possible (by amusing coincidence, E-flat major happens to be the same key as one of the most famous quiet openings in all of music history, that of Wagner's *Das Rheingold*). The pauses between varied sections in Pärt's music are "on the one hand, codes which denote human deficiency [i.e., the ear's need for an occasional break] and on the other, indicators of the beginnings of a completely different kind of music," according to a CD note by Hermann Conen. Conen presents this as some sort of ground-breaking use of silence by Pärt, evidently unaware that he has just described why symphonies are broken into movements.

The doublespeak also betrays a strong need for authority on the part of the followers. David Drew, for example, relates an incident in which Górecki can't make up his mind about a passage in his String Quartet No. 1. First Górecki composes the original passage. Then he makes a "characteristic" decision that the original is "too easy" an answer, and writes a new passage featuring development instead of "mere repetition." Then the next day, after the Kronos Quartet has stayed up all night learning the new passage, he decides he likes the original one better after all. Indecision? Not according to Drew, who characterizes Górecki's last flip-flop as a "masterly change of mind." What was "mere repetition" when rejected becomes genius when embraced. The need to perceive the workings of authority in a person's every move elevates an ordinary bit of waffling into a series of masterstrokes.

Asked at a public forum about the form of one of his pieces, Górecki turned cosmic. Saying "What is form?," he went to the piano and played a soft chord, let it die away, and delivered his

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Yoda-like clincher: "That is a form." Drew goes on to proclaim that "Nothing [Górecki's] interrogator is likely to have been fishing for would ever have been caught and landed," as though a direct and reasonable question were not worthy of an honest answer. Instead of a cop-out, the exchange becomes an example of transcendent generosity: the great artist rewarding a humdrum question with the bestowal of a visionary gem.

VI

The most common explanation of the New Simplists' success in winning audiences follows the lines of a populist fairy tale. The story goes that the art of composition had been languishing for decades in the ivory tower, stifled by complexity and intellectualism. Now it has been freed, its emotions have been rekindled, and it has been restored to the ordinary folk who are its rightful owners. The New Simplists, in short, have saved music by simplifying it.

This is an appealing argument, and it has the added advantage of positioning the New Simplicity as merely the latest of many instances since medieval times where compositional methods have undergone a simplification. At first glance, the argument seems to work. But what it fails to take into account is that of all the many waves of reform and simplification that have occurred up until the present, not a single one has produced a music that was devoid of inner life, a music so devoutly opposed to dialogue with its listeners.

What about the apparent success of the New Simplists in renewing interest in classical music? With all these recordings being sold, it may seem that credit is due these composers for making headway against some of the immense challenges facing classical music today. Aren't they finally re-establishing the connection between audiences and living composers? Aren't they finally accomplishing what generations of music teachers have tried to do: get people to think of classical music as something vital and "relevant"?

Yes and no. It's true that most of the New Simplists' music is recorded by classical musicians and produced and marketed as classical music. It dresses itself in classical sounds, and it strikes

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a reverential pose towards musical tradition. But the links it has to the classical music tradition are isolated and skin-deep. Perhaps more important, the classical features it does use are not the main source of its appeal. What the success of the New Simplicity affirms is not the power of classical music, with its dialogues and ambiguities, but the elemental power of music's raw materials.

The Nonesuch Górecki third contains an example of what, in its most lovely incarnations, can surely be the most potent musical power source of all: the human voice. Dawn Upshaw, a wonderfully communicative soprano, sings a few sustained notes, and people have an immediate response (when a Los Angeles radio station first broadcast the recording, most of the phone calls were prompted by the vocal passages).

The composer himself is among those at a loss to explain why this recording should be so successful, particularly since the symphony has been available in other recordings since 1977. Neither of the two other performances currently available has sold more than a fraction of the Nonesuch version, either before or after that version came out. It certainly didn't hurt Nonesuch to have better publicity, distribution and packaging. Nor did it hurt that Upshaw and David Zinman, the conductor, are both well-known to classical buyers. But it also doesn't begin to explain the phenomenon.

What does begin to explain it is to compare the singers on all three recordings. Upshaw's competitors sing well, but they don't deliver the goods the way she does. And Nonesuch's sound—it's so rich and enveloping that it's more than realistic. It's almost hyper-realistic. Upshaw's voice has a glow and resonance that seem to suggest angelic disembodiment.

At this point, however, we're not talking about music as composition, but as an aural-emotional experience. The composer's task in such a situation is virtually the opposite of what a classical composer's job has always been. Instead of creating something dynamic and engaging, he is creating something static and relaxing. Instead of giving us music that requires our own input and interpretation, he provides music that is already pre-interpreted. The listener has been reduced from participant in a musical process to consumer of a musical product.

If all of this seems harsh criticism, it is criticism that results

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

only from taking the New Simplists at their word. By their own declaration, they do not function as classical composers always have. Instead of taking the elements that the classical tradition has considered to be raw materials and working with them, they pass the materials along to us with only minimal craftsmanship—commodities still partly in their original wrappers.

The New Simplists are correct, of course, when they insist that there is something beautiful and mystical about these commodities. And they have been astute enough to recognize that the value of these commodities has, to many ears, been slighted in much twentieth-century classical music. But it's not so easy to abandon craftsmanship, and it's even harder to stake a proprietary claim to universal materials. In this they rely rather heavily on their extraneous explanations to save the day. But verbal accompaniments offer no salvation here. What is lacking in the music cannot be made up for in the ideas that are wrapped around it. The ear does not hear program notes.

To the degree that you abandon the challenge of the Western composer—that is, the challenge to create an authentically contemporary music of ambiguity and dialogue—it seems only reasonable to ask whether you do not also relinquish the status the composer has come to enjoy within Western music. This status is not a given; the notion of the composer as the primary person in the musical process has been with us for no more than 500 years in any form we would recognize, and it was gained by composers on the basis of the sophistication they were able to win for their art. A thousand years ago, there was little concept of a composer as separate from a performer. Were the New Simplists actually to find themselves in the distant past to which they aspire, they would be out of a job.

Of course, there is no danger that they actually would find themselves in the distant past, and that brings us to the biggest flaw in the New Simplicity's foundation. What the New Simplists are asking us to do is to return to a past of putative innocence: not just to use old texts or musical ideas in creating something new, but to *go back* to being as we once were. There are two impossibilities associated with this wish.

The first impossibility is that we cannot go back. We cannot be what we are not. We cannot forget what we know too well to forget, or to believe what we were born too late to believe. We

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cannot pretend to be Medieval monks, or Greek soldiers surrounded by Saracens, or an eighteen-year-old woman in a Gestapo prison, or anyone in another time or place. We are not in their position. We do not have the right to express ourselves as they did *and still call it self-expression.* To attempt to do so is not to honor them but to expropriate their identities; it is not to know them better, only better to supplant the difficult facts of their lives with our own emotional fantasies.

Does the impossibility of transporting ourselves into history also mean that we can't return to the musical world of Bach or Mozart or anyone else? Obviously it does, even though we may continue to find use and value in old music. But we are not spared the need to try to devise new forms of music that have an inner life, difficult though the challenge may seem. And while we cannot in good faith act as if we were our own forebears, we are still free, as artists have always been, to adopt elements from other times and places in fashioning an art that is new and is uniquely ours, an art that acknowledges its time as the present. The problem begins when we excuse ourselves from the responsibilities of that task under the pretense of following some other era's rules—especially when we don't really follow those rules at all, but only an arbitrarily primitivized version of them (Górecki's canon, for instance).

The second impossibility is the notion that life has ever been as simple as the New Simplicity tries to suggest. Using the hindsight afforded by history, it ascribes to the people of the past a sense of innocence that didn't exist at the time; the present, after all, never seems simple or innocent for those who are in the midst of it. Using faux naïvete, the New Simplicity tries to revive times and people who, whether artful or artless in their expression, were certainly not naïve—or to put it another way, it tries to revive times and people that never actually existed. Under the guise of simplification, it strips an ancient art of its brains, then presents the lobotomized result to us as something our forebears would have understood.

And so we have a music that, for the listener who seeks more than the token artifacts of classical music, offers no dialogue, no ambiguity, and no inner life. What we are left with is a surface that speaks of depth, and a depth that speaks of nothing. The sounds that at first blush tell us this is classical music give way to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a center that is classical music's opposite—more completely so than any other type of music. What we gain in this bargain is a way of asserting faith in simplicity. What we give up is faith in music as an art.

Note: Following is a list of recordings discussed in this essay:

Henryk Górecki (b. 1933): Symphony No. 3; Dawn Upshaw, soprano, London Sinfonietta, David Zinman, cond. Nonesuch CD: 79282-2 (1992) • Symphony No. 3*; *Three Pieces in Olden Style*; S. Woytowicz, soprano,* Polish Radio National Symphony of Katowice, J. Katlewicz, cond. *Amen*; Poznan Boys' Choir, J. Kurczewski, cond. Olympia CD: OCD 313 (1977) • String Quartet No. 1 ("*Already It Is Dusk*"); Kronos Quartet. "*Lerchenmusik*"; London Sinfonietta Soloists. Nonesuch CD: 9 79257-2 (1990) • *Beatus Vir*; Totus Tuus; Old Polish Music*; Nikita Storojev, bass,* Prague Philharmonic Choir, Czech Philharmonic Orchestra, John Nelson cond. Argo CD: 436 835-2 (1993).

John Tavener (b. 1944): *The Protecting Veil,** *Threnos*; Steven Isserlis, cello, London Symphony Orchestra, Gennadi Rozhdestvensky, cond.* Also on disk: Britten Cello Suite No. 1. Virgin Classics CD: 0777 7 59052 2 (1992) • *The Whale*; London Sinfonietta and others, David Atherton, cond. Apple Records/ Capitol EMI CD: CDP 0777 7 98497 2 7 (1970/1992) • *Celtic Requiem, Nomine Jesu,* Coplas*; London Sinfonietta and others, David Atherton and John Tavener,* cond. Apple Records/ Capitol EMI CD: CDP 0777 7 81252 2 8 (1971/1993).

Arvo Pärt (b. 1935): *Miserere; Sarah Was Ninety Years Old*; Paul Hillier, Hilliard Ensemble. *Festina Lente*; Orchester der Beethovenhalle Bonn, Dennis Russell Davies, cond. ECM CD: ECM New Series 1430; 847 539-2 (1981) • *Passio*; Hilliard Ensemble. ECM CD: ECM 1370; 837 109-2 (1988) • *Tabula Rasa*; Gidon Kremer and Tatjana Grindenko, violins, Alfred Schnittke, prepared piano, Lithuanian Chamber Orchestra, Saulus Sondeckis, cond. *Fratres*; Gidon Kremer, violin, Keith Jarrett, piano. *Cantus in memory of Benjamin Britten*; Staatsorchester Stuttgart, Dennis Russell Davies, cond. *Fratres*; 12 Cellists of the Berlin Philharmonic. ECM CD: ECM 1275; 817 764-2 (1984).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MARK JARMAN

Nine Unholy Sonnets

Look into the darkness and the darkness looks—
As if it massed before a telescope
Or turned because behind it heard your step—
The darkness looks at you. This idea spooks
Some people, and their reason self-destructs.
Seized by a love of daylight, back they jump
Into the known, blazing like a headlamp,
Into the senses tuned like cars and trucks.

And what about the counsel of my friend
Who says that when we look for God, remember
God looks for us? If that's what starts the thing,
Then we must drive in circles till we find
It's all one. To be looked for is to look for.
And seeing is believing and being seen.

*

God does not know, God is what is known.
For affirmation ask the living bone.
God does not love, God is what is loved.
Ask flesh in which the skeleton is gloved.
God does not judge, God is what is judged.
Ask rock, ask mountains that the ice has budged.
God is not obeyed, God obeys
And lines up when we stop to count our days.
God is not life, God is what is lived.
And our lives must be seen to be believed.
God is not death, God is what survives.
On certain days all creatures love their lives.
God is not creation, God creates.
Consider things made by our loves and hates.

*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Although I know God's immanence can speak
In sunlight's parallels and intersections;
Although I know the spiritual technique
For finding God in all things, when I pray
It is to nothing manifest at all.
And though I know it's merely technical,
I do not pray to nothing. Yesterday,
One of those offhand, razor-edged rejections
The world flips like a Frisbee grazed my cheek.
It drew blood. No consoling recollections
Of having shaken off that sort of play
Helped me forget it. I could not recall
My strength, and brooded, lost and tragical,
Till, marking this blank page, I found a way.

*

Which is the one, which of the imps inside
Unglues itself from the yin-yang embrace
Of its good twin or its bad twin and plays
The angel advocate, the devil's guide?
Which blob of conscience, like a germicide,
Catches and kills the impulse when it strays?
Which impulse with light playing on its face,
Its fright mask, leads into the dark outside?

All of them shapeless feelings given form
By words which they in turn give substance to.
As particle and wave make light, they swarm
Together with their names. And we do, too,
Praying that God knows each of us and cares
About the things we speak of in our prayers.

*

A useful God will roost in a bird-box,
Wedge-head thrust out, red-feathered in the sun,
Each huge eye squinting through a minus sign,
His stiffened wakefulness, like a bird book's
Audubon print, hiding his claws' and beak's
Readiness to enjoy their work and soon.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A God like that will watch us think of sin,
Tilting his head, before he shrugs and backs
Away inside, leaving an empty hole.
Something of nature for the neighborhood,
Charming in daylight, while the pose is held . . .
We know, of course, in darkness rats are harried,
Moles are dismembered, and their screams are horrid.
A God like that can make the nighttime hell.

*

Balaam upon his ass was unaware
That he was not completely in control
Or that his own ego was not his soul.
His ass, however, knew enough to fear
The figure standing in the thoroughfare.
God opened the ass's mouth so she could tell
Balaam, who could not see the obstacle,
That striking her, as he had, was unfair.

I want like Balaam to be shown my soul.
His was a donkey blessed with second sight,
Endowed with speech to limn the invisible.
And mine—will it rear up in holy fright
Or stall before the garage doors of hell?
I need a metaphor to sleep tonight.

*

We drove to the world's end and there betrayed
The ones we promised not to. While we drove
We talked about the afterlife and love,
Slowing to an impatient crawl, delayed
By roadwork, in an idling parade
We couldn't see the head or tail of.
We inched past miles of asphalt, reeking stuff,
Stroked by a rake of fire as it was laid.
And we agreed the analogues for hell
Came to us everywhere we looked in life.
But not for heaven. For it we couldn't find
A metaphor or likeness. Not until

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

We had betrayed our loved ones, at the end,
Did we have something to compare it with.

*

Soften the blow, imagined God, and give
Me one good reason for this punishment.
Where does the pressure come from? Is it meant
To kill me in the end or help me live?
My thoughts about you are derivative.
Still, I believe a part of me is bent
To make your grace look like an accident
And keep my soul from being operative.
But if I'm to be bent back like the pole
A horseshoe clangs against and gives a kink to,
Then take me like the grinning ironmonger
I saw once twist a bar that made him sink to
His knees. His tongue was like a hot pink coal
As he laughed and said he thought that he was stronger.

*

Dear God, Our Heavenly Father, Gracious Lord,
Mother Love and Maker, Light Divine,
Atomic Fingertip, Cosmic Design,
First Letter of the Alphabet, Last Word,
Mutual Satisfaction, Cash Award,
Auditor Who Approves Our Bottom Line,
Examiner Who Says That We Are Fine,
Oasis That All Sands Are Running Toward.

I can say almost anything about you,
O Big Idea, and with each epithet,
Create new reasons to believe or doubt you,
O Black Hole, White Hole, Presidential Jet.
But what's the anything I must leave out? You
Solve nothing but the problems that I set.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

DANIEL HOFFMAN

Bob

Hadn't been out of the house, except
once a week to the hospital, since
that day three months ago when they brought him
home from the mine, doubled over
in pain, no longer breathing acid fumes
or dust from the schists the copper ran in,
but sick, sick inside. So I didn't expect
while scraping and sanding my hour-glass puller
tipped keel-up above the tide-line
to see come, slowly down the hill
to the beach road, his big green pickup
with the front hitch for a snowplow and movable
spotlights on the cab, and him
driving. He stopped, rolled the window down,
looked out and said, Be sure you caulk
those seams around the keel. Beside him
Katherine gave a wan smile. Then, toward us
came that little red Toyota
of Hobie's, who'd had hard words from him
two winters past about cutting wrongside
of the line between their woodlots. Since then
they hadn't spoken, but Hobie stopped,
leaned from his window and called out, Hey there!
Good to see ya! D'ya know the mackeral
are running? My boy hauled in a bucketful
at the town wharf last night. And next
Bing's empty dump truck roared and rattled
across the beach, then stopped, blocking
the road—Hiya (as though they'd spoken
only the day before)—We've finished
roofing that house on Varnumville
—talk whittled down to the dailiness

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of living and the expectation of
tomorrows. I said, If you don't stop by
Liz will be disappointed. So I got in
beside them. He winced, putting the truck
in gear. It rolled up to our drive.
At the table by the window we watched
the cove's arms embrace sun-deckled water
stirred by cat's-paw breezes as the gulls
swooped and terns dove. You can see
thirteen islands, he said, from here
(and, as his father had done for us
a quarter-century before, he called
their roll)—Pond Isle, and Beach,
Butter, Colt's Head, Horse's Head, North Haven,
Eagle Isle, Western, and Resolution. . . . He said
the names as one who tolls his beads
before leaving on a long journey
so that never would he forget
this place, these islands,
wherever it is that he'll be gone.

Blizzard

Nothing could stand in the way of its falling.
Day gave up the ghost to silent stormlight.
Like an autumn bear the sun slunk back in its lair.

Comfort and warmth, for those who remembered them,
Were compressed by the huge weight of the present,
Recalled like fossil leaves in stone.

Who could count how long the snow came down
While days were nights and nights were winter?
Time was trapped in the dark, in the icy wind.

Then the shape-shifting wind from the cave of the unseen king

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Whose dominion is illusion
Rearranged bulk, expanse, surfaces, height

In the geometry of another country
Where we once had recognized our houses,
Trees, fences, gardens, roads.

When like ferrets we tunnelled out of our burrows
And blinkingly peered around us, dazed
And dazzled by the merciless shine,

On pathless ways through untracked nowhere
We saw revelations of mounds and valleys,
Of no known objects in the one uncolor,

As purity poured into our eyeballs, with the pain
Of perfect whiteness where even the shadows
Are less white than white but of a whiteness still.

What could we do to reclaim the unfamiliar
And make it again into images of the familiar
With our clumsy mittened hands?

Yet, in less than a week, the tall drifts scattered
On aimless winds, and then, as the winds died
And roofmounds slowly sank and icicles fell,

Houses, trees, fences appeared again.
Now ruts are runnels, and under snowmelt
On the icy pavement footsteps linger

Of one who when the storm had just begun
Passed unseen, and vanished. Now we reclaim
Our shovelled paths and unblocked roads, the shrinking

Snowpiles pocked with dirt. The earth despoils
With slush, soils snow with sludge. This is our world—
We are earth's people, the earth's smudge is our sign.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

COLETTE INEZ

Basho Takes an Upland Journey to Visit Poets in the North

At the Short Lines Depot he watches potholes
fill with rain. Why does water swim in circles
like braids of a nest? He muses, he clears
his throat. Five swallows arc over a hill
of abandoned tires. We arrive. Lake waves
against stones echo phrases Basho hears
and translates into ordered syllables.

He praises stately clouds and the rabbit
on the moon whose loneliness he compares
to a hermit looking for villagers in the mountains.
"That butterfly perched on a stack of wood
is the soul of a devout believer reborn
from a lotus after five hundred years,"
he says to poets pouring wine in his cup

and words in his ear. White fire of Venus grazes
low in the west. Our talk ignites. Bedlam.
Decimation. His broad head bends to the sorrows
of our century. The next day we show him
corn husks glinting along the river.
He prefers to look at tadpoles in town streams,
allows a fly to sit on his nose. "Hut or palace,

the hungry fly threatens the peace," he says to us.
We understand his *ahas* will leap with frogs
back into his history—seasoned traveler, he longs
to see his face under a conical hat, the bushy brows
repeated in the waters of Lake Biwa, to hear evening
snow on Mount Hira pelting his backpack. "The poet's ink

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

wakes at the stroke of his brush," say those to whom
he is a master. As he boards the morning bus,

Basho counsels the poets: "Use sparrows
instead of nightingales, snails in place of dragons.
Keep a noble mind yet mingle with the crowd."
We shout goodbye and run from a spring rain
that chatters like a troupe of monkeys
shuddering with cold in the pastoral grace of a town
two hours south of Canada's vast, wintry acres.

Hard Muse

"Too many embellishments—
dump that '*pallid wash of blue*'
at someone else's door.
Verbal murk pollutes your work.
Abandon jonquils, pale rain,

dew on trillium. You're like a lover
who's exhausted every posture,"
she says, peering over my shoulder.
"Too much cascade, ripple and froth.
Get rid of the bromide of love

budding into song under a wan sky.
Things frilled or blurred in fog,
fringed, lobed, starred, only go
so far. Better have juncoes flying
in a silver ring, bloodroot

and toothwort in the woods.
You've too many twittery, ashen,
flesh-pink Boucher cherub phrases,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pearl-sheen dawn and bluet praises.
'To conjugate a woodpecker's tap tap

as it probes for grub above the lap
of water on mossy shrubs,'
smacks of the ornate.
Tu Fu said ideas in poems
should be simple and noble.

Think of words as radishes, biting and sharp,
planted in a well-drained patch.
Go back and revise," she gives me a stern look,
slashing my grade in her record book.

NORMAN WILLIAMS

Games in the Darkening Air

Beneath the blue, metallic clouds of late November,
The children, spotlit by the lowered sun,
Take turns dying heroically. Gunned down
In sprints across the yard, they clutch their chests
And crumple, crying out for life itself before
They still, sometimes with a final twitch.
In that brief interval before they rise,
Renewed, and start for home, I imagine them:
Heads tucked, close-quartered with the frozen ground.
Above, the clinging oak leaves clatter in
The northwest wind, and, farther off, a stream
Of sparrows empties from a hickory
Like cinders from a flue. Then they are gone.
For hours, first. Then winter. Then, for years.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MAXINE KUMIN

In Praise of the New Transfer Station

How I love to go to the dump that is not the dump
I remember from the pre-ecological days
when we backed our pickup trucks as close to the edge
as we dared and hurled the detritus of our lives
into the smoldering pit rats flittered around.
Fire popped longnecked bottles that once held wine

and flags of escaping trash madly danced in the wind.
I remember the gray malaise attached to that dump
stirring something more than ashes and unburnt rind.
The town's teenage toughs hung out there in a daze
smoking pot, swapping girls, trying to jump-start their lives,
a motley assortment of mohawked Harrys and Eds

who ended up in the mill, each one at the edge
of a stack of hemlock the serrated sawblades whined
through, ripping the proximate boards as lightly as leaves.
It's a social occasion now to go to the dump
that is not a dump anymore, where on Saturdays
neighbors collect on the landscaped sward that surrounds

the recycle bins for aluminum, tin, the ground-
glass machine that sets everyone's teeth on edge
as it gobbles used jars to build roads with another day,
and neat pyramids of newsprint that will soon wind
up pulped for more news. Items we used to dump
are arrayed in the Recycle Hut like so many loaves

and fishes: Monopoly, bicycles seeking new lives,
toy trains and Barbies, barrows to wheel around,
while outside on a knoll at the dump that is not a dump
anymore, a sculpture of tires serves as a hedge

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and under a clump of birches, scoured bright by the wind,
squat porcelain toilets and tubs that have seen better days.

You could cater a picnic here almost any day,
admire the sparkling used metal, how sunlight laves
and redeems clustered sundries that wait in the wind
to be weighed and carted away toward another round
of orderly reincarnation. Crocuses edge
the fenceline of the dump that's no longer a dump

and in a few days new sedge will spring up around
the castled stump pile where a dumpling chipmunk lives.
The lilacs of May will lightly perfume the wind.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

JOHN FREDERICK NIMS

Love's Progress

1

One place: a grottoed recess in Liguria
Carved out of rockface by the restless sea;
An old inn there, a chapel of the Doria,
No entry but by boat: that summer, we
Dallied with lunch and wine and with each other,
Drunk with the sun and silliness as well,
Then—towel and swimsuit packed—in freshening weather
The boat's too cozy cockpit sealed the spell:

Much snuggling up, much kissing, smothered laughter
Curtained in windy valence of her hair,
Or so we thought, who, unaware till after
Were studied by some dozen people there.
One bluff old salt, eyes twinkly, shrugged, "Should one
Practice these moonlight mysteries in the sun?"

2

So I learned loonier ways, rhymed "dune light . . .
June light . . ."
Only, some weeks gone by, to dirge it so:
"Seeing our love, the affair of mist and moonlight,
Is water under a bridge burned long ago . . ."
I drawl it now; we laugh and lean together;
You wonder "who she was?" No, I'll not say,
Except, it makes no difference if or whether.
"Love" was a windy labial till today.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Now love means *you*. *You/love*—the two synonymous.
Signposts all signal *you*, and that's my way.
Memory's awash in *you*; you've grown eponymous:
Places we've been become you. If, I say,
Each land we travel were renamed as *You*,
That name were truer than all maps are true.

Strange!

I'd have you known! It puzzles me forever
To hear, day in, day out, the words men use,
But never a single word about you, never.
Strange!—in your every gesture, worlds of news.
On busses people talk. On curbs I hear them;
In parks I listen, barbershop and bar.
In banks they murmur, and I sidle near them;
But none allude to you there. None so far.

I read books too, and turn the pages, spying:
You must be there, one beautiful as you!
But never, not by name. No planes are flying
Your name in lacy trailers past the blue
Marquees of heaven. No trumpets cry your fame.

Strange!—how no constellations spell your name!

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ROBERT FARNSWORTH

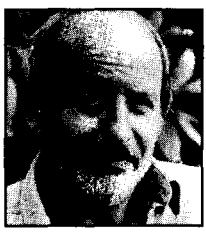
Eminent Domain

The house is already open as a stage set
to the sun. Awkward, but almost gentle,
the steamshovel's iron bucket bites down
through the splintered second floor.
Plaster blizzards into the kitchen below.
A closet door (with a porcelain knob!)
dangles from one hinge. Catastrophe
doesn't hold me here, nor the bitter
thought of someone's home bought just
to be demolished on a blue day in April,
nor even the sudden awareness watching
brings, of all the structures moviemakers
destroy to better represent destruction.
No, it's the performance, the stylish wag
and swing and grasp of that iron arm
that fascinates. How the bucket knocks
thoughtfully on a window frame until
it shatters, then digs intimately away
at the wreckage for a while. Stiff, polite,
it doesn't exactly mean to pry, even as
it's tearing out the wall. Despite the man
toggling inside its compound eye, despite
its repertoire of gestures, the machine seems
void of intention as gravity itself, its leverings
a clumsy adjunct to the wind now shattering
the tulips next door. And a house with half
a roof, an ancient sink in bloom atop some
rusty pipes, that awful wallpaper; a house thus
open to scrutiny is hopeless, too inexact with
overtone, too smothered in regret. Down with it.
Untraceable motive, terrible claw, down with it.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Unterberg Poetry Center

OF THE 92ND STREET Y



E. L. Doctorow

Yusef Komunyakaa

Nadine Gordimer

Since its founding in 1939, The Unterberg Poetry Center's mission has been to present the best contemporary literature in all of its many voices and forms. We invite you to join us as we continue this mission in our fifty-sixth season. Readings are followed by a wine reception and book-signing.

Authors reading this season include (in order of appearance) --

American Writers

E.L. Doctorow, Sam Shepard, Mary Jo Salter, Mark Strand, Garrison Keillor, Edward Albee, Linda Gregg, William H. Gass, William Gaddis, Cyrus Cassells, Martín Espada, Marilyn Hacker, Tony Kushner, Elizabeth Tallent, James Welch, Yusef Komunyakaa, William Matthews, Sandra Cisneros, Grace Paley, E. Annie Proulx, Jane Smiley, Anne Waldman, Jay Wright, Carolyn Kizer, Ursula K. LeGuin

International Writers

Alice Munro,Carol Shields, Sir Stephen Spender, Doris Lessing, Nadine Gordimer, Hugo Claus, Cees Nooteboom, Caryl Churchill, Robertson Davies, Pawel Huelle, Ivan Klíma, Octavio Paz

Special Programs

History and Fiction with Daniel Aaron, Russell Banks, Shelby Foote, George Garrett, Allan Gurganus, Charles Johnson, Thomas Keneally, Patrick O'Brian, Marilynne Robinson, Simon Schama, Mary Lee Settle and Madison Smartt Bell

Women in Mind: New Musical Melodramas with Claire Bloom and Brian Zeger

After Ovid: New *Metamorphoses* with Eavan Boland, Amy Clampitt, Alice Fulton, Jorie Graham, Kenneth Koch, Michael Longley, Derek Mahon, Paul Muldoon, Robert Pinsky, C.K. Williams and others

A Martin Luther King Day Gathering of Poets

At $125, a Poetry Center Membership entitles you to attend all these events, running October through May, and much more, including a 20% discount on authors' books, a 25% discount on one single ticket per event, and a subscription to The Poetry Center's Newsletter. The Unterberg Poetry Center also offers an extensive Writing Program and a Sunday lecture series, "Biographers and Brunch."

Call **996-1100** for a brochure or to order your tickets. P53

92 St Y
CELEBRATING LIFE AT 120

The Unterberg Poetry Center of the 92nd Street Y • 1395 Lexington Ave NYC 10128 • An agency of UJA-Federation

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

RICHARD HORNBY

Remembering Joe Papp: "A Whim of Iron"

LIKE MOST GREAT THEATRICAL PRODUCERS, Joseph Papp was a charlatan. He knew little about the art of the theatre, was a terrible director himself, and sometimes hired people of dubious ability, especially in his later years. He was, however, a brilliant politician. The early success of his New York Shakespeare Festival, back in the fifties, was in itself a political triumph; the idea of performing Shakespeare *for free* with big-name actors and directors (unprecedented in New York or anywhere else) was the only way anyone could ever have gotten to do theatre in Central Park. Robert Moses, City Parks Commissioner and one of the mightiest politicians in New York history, opposed him, but Papp won. All those audience members might trample the grass and bushes (Moses' ideal park was one where no one ever went), but free culture for the masses was an invincible notion.

Papp began as a stage manager, on Broadway and for CBS-TV. Given that background, one might have expected that his ambitions would have led him to producing commercially, but instead he went the nonprofit route. Was this because of a love of serious drama, or simply because he sensed that Broadway was dying, and could not satisfy his ambitions? Certainly his desire to bring Shakespeare's plays to schoolchildren and ordinary working people for free was sincere enough, and admirable. (Nonprofit theatre does not have to be done, gratis, in schools and parks; other nonprofit producers, like Gordon Davidson at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, have had successful careers playing to elite audiences in beautiful theatre buildings constructed by wealthy donors.) On the other hand, he was the most anti-intellectual person I have ever met in the theatre, as well as (in a profession hardly known for shrinking violets) the most self-promoting. He never did a good deed without getting the maximum publicity out of it, whether it was defying the House Un-American Activities Committee for its anti-communist witch hunts in the fifties, or the NEA for its anti-obscenity pledge in 1990. He was not the first producer to cast people of color in traditionally white roles, but he was certainly the loudest to publicize it. He was always eager to promote experimental work—as long as it was trendy enough to get good coverage in the media.

What an irony that Papp would have founded a *Shakespeare* Festival!

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In fact, the man knew almost nothing about Shakespeare. Having directed some of the plays (badly), he of course had familiarity with the texts, but his knowledge of Shakespeare criticism, Elizabethan history, or theatre history, was nil. Back in the eighties, he was in residence for several semesters as Distinguished Professor in the School of Theatre at Florida State University, where I was teaching at the time. "In residence" meant that he would fly in for a few days, offer workshops and lectures, and collect $30,000, which he would donate to the NYSF. (Papp was what politicians call "money honest," unbribable, but vulnerable to publicity, flattery, or support for his projects.) The workshops always followed the same pattern: on the first day, hundreds of people would crush into a rehearsal hall to see him work with actors, some of whom were students, but others of whom were notable professionals from New York. After hearing Papp pontificate—rarely allowing the actors to speak, much less perform—the audience would thin out; on the second day, attendance would be down to a handful, much to Papp's distress.

The lectures were a travesty; he would quote Shakespeare from memory, and reminisce about his experiences, then take questions from the audience. "Isn't it true that Shakespeare's plays were written by somebody else?" asked a callow freshman. Any tolerable student of Shakespeare could swat that challenge down like a fly, but Papp, embarrassed by a question he could not answer, stammered and harrumphed that well, yes, maybe Marlowe wrote them, or maybe not. Later, after a newspaper interview, his picture was published with the caption, "If I had studied Shakespeare in college, my approach might have become too cerebral." I put it up on my office door, adding the phrase, "What, me worry?"

In his youth, Papp was a Communist, quitting the party in the fifties. His radicalism was reawakened in the seventies, when he married for the fourth time, to a woman who put him in touch with modern feminism. In the eighties, a son by a former marriage died of AIDS, which similarly put Papp (who had been a bit of a homophobe) in touch with gay liberation. The NYSF became more oriented toward socially conscious plays, toward gay, feminist, and black theatre, but it was not so much radicalism as radical chic. In a tradition that has continued since Papp's death three years ago, the Festival has repeatedly missed out on the best gay or African-American writers, such as Tony Kushner, Paul Rudnick, August Wilson, or Charles Fuller, instead presenting a dreary procession of politically correct no-talents.

Even worse than the playwrights have been the directors he dredged up. The early success of the NYSF was largely because of two outstanding directors, Stuart Vaughan and Gerald Freedman; Vaughan left in the early sixties, and Freedman a decade later (genuinely talented people found Papp very difficult in the long run), to be followed by individuals of lesser talent, particularly with the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

classics. In 1991, as Papp was dying, he appointed JoAnne Akalaitis to succeed him as Producer, as well as three young men to serve as directors of the three theatres at his Public Theatre. Among the four of them, they had staged a total of one Shakespearean production! Papp had long ago admitted that he ran the NYSF by whim, leading to the joke that it was "a whim of iron." With this act, Papp bequeathed to his theatre company all the idiosyncrasy and ineptitude that had characterized his late years, without his drive or political savvy. Akalaitis, a quirky but talented director, turned out to have no administrative skill at all. The Board of Trustees quickly replaced her with George C. Wolfe, one of the three subordinates, a plodding director with no talent whatsoever, but who has the right skin color and sexual orientation to be acceptable to the parlor radicals who now dominate the Board. Wolfe had *never* directed a Shakespearean play (at the NYSF or anywhere else), and still has not as of this writing, although the Press Office told me that he is at last considering one. Rumor has it that the replacement of Akalaitis was decided over dinner on impulse by a few Board members, who rammed it through without a search or any serious discussion. The "whim of iron" tradition continues.

By any measure, the New York Shakespeare Festival is in a dreadful state. New plays chosen for production are terrible, and their directors inept. The number of productions has dropped off, and scheduling is haphazard; it is hard to get information out of the Press Office more than a month or two in advance. A production of *Kiss Me Kate*, to star Kevin Kline, could have done much to revive the fortunes of the organization, but, in another round of ineptitude, it had to be canceled. Attendance is poor; there is still hardly any subscription audience (in contrast with other nonprofit companies in New York like the Lincoln Center or the Roundabout, with their huge subscription lists), while the general theatregoer finds little of interest in the eccentric fare that gets put on.

Shakespeare has all but disappeared from the production list. The "Shakespeare Marathon," which Papp instituted to produce every one of Shakespeare's plays, was supposed to be completed by 1992; it petered out with nearly half the canon left. The NYSF is not only vastly inferior to the great Shakespeare companies of England and Canada, it is not even in a league with regional American companies like the Oregon Shakespeare Festival or the Shakespeare Theatre in Washington, D.C.

I saw four plays at the Public this past season. The epitome of all that is wrong with the NYSF was embodied by the production of Suzan-Lori Parks's *The America Play*, directed by Liz Diamond. Parks, who is black and female (and lesbian? That alone remains to make her ideologically perfect) has won a long list of awards and grants, but is dramaturgically illiterate. The play concerns a black man, obsessed with Abraham Lincoln, who develops an historical theme park where,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

for a small fee, people can re-enact shooting Lincoln in the head. The play does not develop this offbeat idea, but only harps on it, as the protagonist chatters endlessly on a variety of subjects, while a succession of black people wander in to try the role of John Wilkes Booth. The action is slow (aggravated in production, under Diamond's direction, by endless pauses), the dialogue aimless and repetitive. And why would blacks want to play at killing Lincoln, impersonating Booth, a fanatical racist? The play is simply mindless icon-bashing.

The NYSF produced *The America Play* in association with the Yale Repertory Theatre, and also the Theatre for a New Audience, reflecting the trend, in these economically troubled times, for non-profit theatres to share productions. Similarly, later in the season, the NYSF presented three productions by The Acting Company, two of which I saw. I had high hopes; founded in 1972 by Margot Harley and the ubiquitous John Houseman, The Acting Company originally began with graduates of the Juilliard School's Drama Division (which Houseman founded), including such fine actors as Kevin Kline, Patti LuPone, William Hurt, and Christopher Reeve. Since 1980, the company has functioned as the touring arm of the Kennedy Center in Washington, D. C., and since 1991 has been under the direction of Zelda Fichandler, the eminent long-time Producing Director of the Arena Stage in Washington.

Alas, The Acting Company, always so lively in the past, rather than rejuvenating the Public, seemed to be dragged down with it. Carlyle Brown's *The African Company Presents "Richard III"* is yet another static, talky, muddled play on an African-American theme. It is a historical piece based on a fascinating event, the attempt of a company of black actors to perform Shakespeare in New York City in 1821. Errol Hill, in his splendid book, *Shakespeare in Sable*, showed how the tradition of black Americans playing Shakespeare goes well back into the nineteenth century, and includes some of the finest Shakespearean actors we have ever had. The African Company, however, failed, due to general prejudice against blacks, and the specific opposition of the fashionable Park Theatre nearby, which saw the group as dangerous competition.

Much of Brown's play, however, is deadly dull, sounding like a theatre history lesson, relaying almost every last bit of factual detail on the African Company from Hill's book. Endless unmotivated exposition tells us everything from the layout of the theatre to the names of the actors in the company. Sensing that his treatment is about as dramatic as the telephone book, Brown tries to hype things up with a bit of early feminism: the actress playing Lady Anne disapproves of the character's behavior, dropping out of the cast after lengthy arguments with the actor-manager playing Richard. But why then did she take the role in the first place? And play it for several performances? Again, fashionability takes precedence over dramaturgy, or even common sense. Nor do we ever learn what Shakespeare means

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to these characters, nor why they want to perform him; their desire to act floats in a sea of historical facts that reveal nothing of their inner lives.

The production of *Twelfth Night* should have shown The Acting Company in all its glory. It is an ideal play for a young cast. All the characters are young or can be played that way; even Duke Orsino is specifically described as a young man. It contains some of the funniest moments Shakespeare ever wrote, yet also some of the most beautiful lyrical passages ("Make me a willow cabin at your gate . . ."). Although the production was indeed well spoken (the Company has an admirably large number of vocal teachers on its staff), the direction, by Bartlett Sher, was hopelessly incompetent. Bad Shakespearean direction in America usually means forcing some unwieldy "concept" onto the play, like setting *Hamlet* in East Harlem (which Joe Papp once did); Sher avoided that kind of nonsense, using a mostly bare stage and pleasant Cavalier period costumes (designed by Kim Krumm Sorenson). He did, however, employ seven doors at the back of the stage, with people constantly banging in and out, turning a romantic comedy into a French farce. The resulting performance was restless and unclear, with every single line—every phrase!—punctuated by an action. The acting was variable. Jonathan Wade was both dashing and goofy as the lovesick Orsino, while Alison Sheehy was elegant and beautiful as Olivia, but others seemed miscast and aimless. Anyone who did not know the play in advance would have found this production totally confusing.

The same could be said of the *Richard II* I saw in March. The only Shakespeare production of the season wholly produced by the NYSF, it was directed by Steven Berkoff, an iconoclastic actor and director from England. The entire cast was costumed in homogenized, black, elegant Edwardian clothing, with almost nothing to designate social standing or function. The acting was noncommittal and generalized, with the monologues lacking the essential ebb and flow of genuine emotion. Michael Stuhlbarg was a dreadful Richard, with a tight, unresonant, monotonous voice, and a tendency endlessly to gaze into the distance, off in a world of his own that had nothing to do with the play, his fellow actors, or us woeful audience members.

I still recall NYSF productions I saw in Central Park over thirty years ago, directed by Stuart Vaughan, which were lively, engaging, sensitive to nuance, and crystal clear. The Festival then seemed on the cutting edge of change in New York theatre (and American theatre generally), from a thriving but commercial, middlebrow enterprise to a serious artistic resource like those in the great, state-supported theatre companies in Europe. Instead, both commercial and nonprofit theatre in New York entered a long decline. Vaughan told me that, when he directed again for Papp for a while in the late 1980s, it felt like "show business," not financially (always "money honest"), but

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in the sense of being crass and prosaic. Joe Papp's ultimate legacy may be one of artistic bankruptcy.

Edward Albee's latest play, *Three Tall Women*, won the Pulitzer and three other major prizes, plus the hearts and minds of almost every critic in New York except me. It is, in fact, a fairly good play, but suffers from the excessive narrative that, although beautifully written, makes so much of Albee's late work sluggish. The central figure is a wealthy, nameless widow aged ninety-two, incontinent and senile, with a painful broken arm that will not heal. In contrast to her decrepit condition, her surroundings are lavish—in the Promenade Theatre production, the setting, designed by James Noone, was a gorgeous, French-style bedroom, with patterned blue silk wallpaper, parquet floors, and an Oriental carpet.

The old woman, identified in the program only as "A," is attended by a paid companion, a restless grumbler identified as "B," played by Marian Seldes as bony, angular, and twisted, with an evil grin on her face, a nightmarish, Strindbergian figure. "C," a young woman lawyer, has arrived to try to take charge of A's financial affairs; unsigned checks and unpaid bills have piled up. The old woman babbles of her youth; the companion smiles and complains; the lawyer makes snide comments.

After an hour of these three decidedly unpleasant tall women, I was ready to leave, but Albee was setting us up. At the end of Act 1, the old woman has a stroke; Act 2 consists of her fantasies as she is dying. She imagines herself as holding a conversation among herself as a young woman in her twenties, a middle-aged matron in her fifties, and as her ancient, dying self. The two younger women are played, in her dream, by C and B, respectively. Reexamining her life through the wrong end of the telescope gives it a pattern, a meaning, though it is in fact a story of betrayal, alienation, and physical suffering. Her husband, whom she married for money, turned out to be a philanderer; she had an affair with a stableman in revenge, and then got the man fired. The husband died a lingering death from prostate cancer (reiterating the theme of gross physicality in the midst of affluence). Her son became completely alienated from her. The arguments in Act 2 are on a different plane from the bickering in Act 1: What is the best age of life? What is the happiest moment? What does it all mean? The emotional coldness that has characterized her personality is finally transfigured, into art.

Myra Carter was superb as the ninety-two-year-old, a large and demanding role that would tax even a young person. Jordan Baker was convincing as the lawyer, but was hampered by a shrill voice and muscular tension around her mouth. Marian Seldes, as mentioned, gave a potent performance as the twisted companion, made all the more impressive by her transformation into an elegant matron in a fifties Dior dress in Act 2. The costumes, by Muriel Stockdale, were

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

quietly impressive, while Lawrence Sacharow's direction was brisk and polished.

The Actors' Gang is an experimental Los Angeles theatre company founded by actor Tim Robbins in 1981, when he was still a student at UCLA. Over the years, as his acting career took off, he has continued to support it, with money and Hollywood contacts as well as with energy and talent, serving as Artistic Director, while performing or directing from time to time. Influenced by Artaud, Brecht, and the Marx Brothers, Actors' Gang productions tend to be lively cartoons, combining strong social commentary with visual and vocal exuberance. Something of the style can be seen in Robbins' politically satirical movie *Bob Roberts*, which he directed himself.

Early last spring, the Actors' Gang moved to its own theatre on Santa Monica and Vine in Hollywood, opening with a production of *The Oresteia*. Drawing on ancient Greek myth rather than Aeschylus' trilogy itself, the work is actually three crafty new plays by two different authors, directed by three different directors. *Agamemnon* was composed by Charles L. Mee, Jr., a critic and avant-garde playwright whose performance pieces are lyrical, witty, and visually arresting, but (like most "performance art") often static and portentous. His *Agamemnon*, instead of having a traditional chorus, uses Herodotus, Thucydides, Homer, and Hesiod, who are described in the stage directions as a quadriplegic, a dwarf or double amputee, a blind man, and an epileptic, respectively. The production, directed by Brian Kulik, played down the grotesqueries, but had the entire stage covered with opened books. I suppose this was meant to symbolize the trampling of history, but instead it just looked like general clutter, and made walking awkward. The scruffy, monotonous setting and the ancient historians' gassy discourse on the nature of myth made the production pretty slow going until Agamemnon arrived, about halfway through, dressed in combat fatigues. The scene where Clytemnestra lures him into the palace on a red carpet, drawn fairly closely from Aeschylus, played powerfully, as it usually does in more traditional productions. There was also a nice touch of wit in having Cassandra unloaded from a packing crate, a prize of war literally shipped home. By and large, however, *Agamemnon* was the least interesting of the trilogy, too weighty, too talky, too clever by half.

Electra was written by Ellen McLaughlin, and directed by Oskar Eustis, who also directed the original *Angels in America*, in which McLaughlin played the Angel. McLaughlin's play explores the mother-daughter relationship of Clytemnestra and Electra. Clytemnestra, elegant but haughty and shallow, keeps her daughter a captive (in the production, tied by a long rope to a stake in the middle of a circle of black gravel), yet Electra, smarter and more vicious than her mother, actually comes off as the dominant figure. Sensing her destiny, she snarls, "I will write on walls with my blood. I will gnaw the bars and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dull my teeth. I will bang my lice-ridden head against the concrete floor and howl and howl. Narrating my history to the air, telling my one story again and again." When her brother Orestes finally arrives, he finds her terrifying, but quickly becomes her pawn, forced to stab their mother. McLaughlin's pungent dialogue, terrifically acted by Clare Wren as Clytemnestra, James Parks as Orestes, and (especially) Shannon Holt as Electra, looking thin, homely, unwashed, and depraved, made *Electra* a winner.

Orestes, the third play, was also written by Charles Mee. Set in a modern hospital, its action, as directed by David Schweizer, was punctuated by rock music, du-wop nurses, and dancing interns, a hilarious and horrifying world reminiscent of William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*. Yet, oddly, of all three parts of the trilogy, this play was the closest to its Greek model—though the model in this case was not Aeschylus' *Eumenides* but Euripides' *Orestes*, a wicked parody of Aeschylus that depicts Electra as a bitch and Orestes as a neurotic. The Mee/Schweizer version kept these, with the same actors from *Electra*, most spectacularly Shannon Holt, in a witty change of manner. While her brother lay on a gurney shivering in fevered nightmares (an element taken straight from Euripides), she dead-panned, "A certain need for position, a certain homicidal rage runs in this family." When a New-Age Helen of Troy announced that "I exfoliate my face once a week with a product that contains oatmeal, honey and nuts," Holt responded with a raised eyebrow and sardonic leer to the audience. Yet these incidents all have parallels in Euripides' offbeat play, as do the rest of the events and characters, who alternate between psychotic bloodthirstiness and banal piety. Tim Robbins was especially amusing as Apollo, a deus ex machina on a TV screen, casually resolving all the problems and mouthing platitudes. It was the best production of a Euripidean play I have ever seen, by an important theatre company that is not cramped by naturalism, like so many American acting groups, but has energy, style, and audacity.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BERT CARDULLO

Rubies in Paradise

TWO FILMS ABOUT WOMEN, one by a woman and the other by a man, each about a woman's journey to a new world, emotionally as well as geographically. *The Piano* was written and directed by the New Zealander Jane Campion, who with this film became the first woman to win the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival (if that means anything to you). Previously she had directed the overaestheticized *Sweetie* (1989), a black comedy about a mentally ill young woman whose madness wreaks havoc on her family as well as herself, and the overrated *An Angel at My Table* (1990), adapted from the autobiography of the New Zealand writer Janet Frame, who was incorrectly diagnosed in her early twenties as an incurable schizophrenic but who escaped institutionalization and a lobotomy through the publication of her first novel (which proved her sanity!).[1] Now we get the endlessly hyped, Oscar-nominated *The Piano*, about a mid-nineteenth-century woman, not quite an artist and not quite mad, who journeys from Scotland to the New Zealand bush in order to get married.

Made at about the same time as *The Piano*, Victor Nuñez's *Ruby in Paradise*, about a late-twentieth-century woman who travels from the mountains of Tennessee to the Florida Panhandle in order to escape marriage, is not nearly as renowned or epical/epochal as Campion's film. But it is the more appealing work, made by a self-described American regionalist. Nuñez's region is northern Florida, where he also set his two previous, virtually unknown films: the moving and subtle *Gal Young 'Un* (1979), about a woman who tries to retire from the world in order to work on her land and take pleasure in natural isolation; and the haunting, textured *A Flash of Green* (1984), about land developers versus land conservationists in a picturesque Gulf-Coast town. It is to the Gulf Coast that the writer-director Nuñez returns in *Ruby in Paradise*.

"Paradise" for twentyish Ruby Lee Gissing is Panama City, Florida, a beach town to which she has driven from her home in Hamilton, Tennessee, which she contrived to flee "without getting pregnant or

[1] Among Australasian "women's films," *An Angel at My Table* is preceded by Gillian Armstrong's superior *My Brilliant Career* (1979), about a teen-aged girl living in the Australian bush at the turn of the century, who chooses a (writing) career over marriage; and Bruce Beresford's less good *The Getting of Wisdom* (1977), also about the coming of age of a turn-of-the-century schoolgirl, one who in this case leaves the Australian bush to study music in Melbourne.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

getting beat up" by her boyfriend. Ruby is trying to find out who she is at the same time that she makes her own living; to these ends she begins keeping a diary (whose entries we hear in the voice-over that runs through the film) and manages to secure a sales job at Chambers' Beach Emporium, a gift shop that caters to the tourist trade. We know right away that Nuñez is interested more in the people (and place) in his story than the story in his people because, as Ruby awakens in a motel room the morning after her arrival in Panama City, he cuts to another "emigrée" on the premises, a young Indian woman who is singing, and with whom his camera spends time as she goes about her maid's duties. We see this gentle creature at the start of *Ruby in Paradise* and we see her under similar circumstances at the end, which means that she doesn't really have a "plot function": like Ruby, she exists in all her ordinariness *and* beauty, and Nuñez simply wanted to validate her being. Nuñez may or may not know the work of Satyajit Ray, but his use of this Indian girl reminded me of the great Bengali filmmaker, who, with apparent artlessness, sought to document life's everyday, undramatic currents for their own pleasurable and wondrous sake as well as to create dramatic order or significance out of the randomness, the formlessness of human existence.

Ruby creates her order or significance, however tentative or even banal, in her diary, and thus it is on her inner journey that Nuñez concentrates more than on her outer action; on her contemplative reaction to what she experiences rather than on the dramatic experience itself. She is not sure exactly what she is doing in Panama City, and we hear her reveal this in voice-over as she writes it in her diary in the little apartment she has rented. This sort of narrative doubling compels us to watch the thoughtful, "inactive" Ruby as she sits with her diary at the kitchen table, just as the "dead-time" shots of Panama City oblige us to observe the physical world she gracefully inhabits. In this way Nuñez makes us appreciate the human being almost apart from the environment, the environment apart from the human being, and both apart from conventional cinematic narrative, which tends to submerge them in mere action.

"Hell is when all your dreams come true," Ruby goes on to write and say in a paraphrase of Oscar Wilde (of all people), except that neither she nor we know what her dreams are. Ruby thinks she wants to find happiness with a man, but she fears both the sacrifices she will have to make in order to do so and the goal of happiness itself, which may close her off to experience. We look on as she gets involved with two men over the course of six to eight months, but the film is not about their competition for her affections and therefore not a triangular love story—unlike *The Piano*; indeed, Ricky and Mike never even meet, let alone contest each other. Ricky is the son of Mrs. Mildred Chambers, for whom he keeps the books at the Beach Emporium, whose money he gambles away, and whose salesgirls he sexually harasses. Ruby proves no exception and, though she has been

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

warned against the handsome, insistent Ricky by his own mother and by a black female coworker, she has a brief if torrid affair with him. He doesn't want to end it, but she does with the words, "I didn't come all this way to be your chippy."

Next she takes up with Mike McCaslin, a sensitive, intelligent fellow who works at a plant nursery and believes in "low-impact living," by which he means a life that is not driven and that therefore has little negative impact either on the human mind/body or the natural environment. Mike eventually asks Ruby to move in with him, but she fears he wants to run her life. He disapproves of the movies she likes—escapist fantasies, quite unlike Nuñez's own film—and the job at which she works, selling the products of a fantasy-driven culture. Mike seems to have his own fantasies, however: one is religion, and the other is the return of his native Panama City to its pristine, undeveloped or unexploited state. Ruby has her share of pleasant moments with the unhurried, affectionate Mike, but ultimately she breaks off her relationship with him. Shortly thereafter, she queries in her diary, "Like where does caring come from? Can we ever know our true desires? And why are we all of us so often lonely and afraid?" Ruby doesn't know the answers, but she knows she needs to ask the questions: this is the only assurance about her that Nuñez will give his audience, one that is nevertheless more universal than many a tidy artistic truth would have us believe.

Ruby ends the film as assistant manager at Chambers' Beach Emporium, following an episode working at an industrial laundry. After Ruby's rejection of him, Ricky had invented a reason for firing her from his mother's store; but Mrs. Chambers brings her hardest worker back, with a promotion, after she learns of her son's motive for the firing. And Ricky himself is sincerely (not sentimentally) contrite for past misbehavior. The episode at the industrial laundry (the only place where the relatively uneducated Ruby could find another job) is remarkable less for the work—the arduousness and machinery of which Nuñez is nonetheless careful to document—than for the women with whom Ruby works. They are Persefina and Wanda, an Hispanic and a black respectively, and they are everything workers normally are not in American films: cheerful, friendly, funny, and uncomplaining. Nuñez did not have to give these two characters speaking parts in his film (as he did have to give such a part to Rochelle Bridges, Ruby's black coworker at the Beach Emporium, since she figures in the minimal plot in addition to serving as Ruby's confidante) but he did so because, again, he is concerned more with people in all their unadulterated humanity than with the fictions and contrivances he can extract from them.

All people save Ruby are ominously absent from the last sequence of *Ruby in Paradise*, which takes place at Chambers' Beach Emporium. She shows up for her first day of work as assistant manager, wearing make-up as well as a dress for the first time in the film, and calls out

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Hi, everybody" as she enters the store. But no one answers, and no one appears to be there. All that we get are shots of the merchandise accompanied only by street sounds. Then the movie ends. There is the suggestion here that Ruby has become, or will become, a ruby—an object valued primarily for its external beauty—glittering in an artificial paradise; that her will to self-examination or self-questioning, by means of her diary, will be deadened by an environment that forces everyone to shine and sell, to suppress her inner voice for her outer image. The last time we see Ruby's diary, it is lying alone on her kitchen table as she makes up her face in a mirror. And one of the last things she does in the film, apart from work, is eagerly attend a male-striptease show on the beach, part of the spring-break festivities in Panama City. Tellingly, earlier in the film she had sarcastically remarked, "We're all selling; forget what's inside," after turning down a job as a stripper at a topless bar.

So perhaps Ruby Lee Gissing is selling out even if her creator, the independent filmmaker Victor Nuñez, is not. Perhaps she has no choice but to sell out in a materialistic society that values slavishness and mindlessness above all else, especially from its lesser-educated and therefore poorer members. For Ruby is relatively poor if she is not destitute, and she has no intention of attending college, like Rochelle, in order to increase her earning power. Yet one of the achievements of Nuñez's film is that he has got us to pay rapt attention to, and think seriously about, a person to whom we normally (if that is the word) would not give a moment's consideration in our daily lives. This is, of course, the special power art—and naturalistic film art in particular—holds over us, the power to engage our sense and sensibility by the simple act of framing. It is a damning as well as astonishing power, however, and at the end of *Ruby in Paradise* we are damned to contemplate the fate of a bemused young woman whose youth still protects her from the realization that she is condemned by our consumer culture to sell things without making them, to pay for things without really owning them, to turn herself into something saleable rather than someone sentient.

Since much of the drama of *Ruby in Paradise* is internal or low-key, which means that it frequently occurs when the titular character is alone and silent (or speaking only in voice-over), it's important that the woman playing Ruby be able to convey that drama through the medium of her face; or, what is not so dissimilar, that the camera be able to extract a drama from that face. Ashley Judd has the right face—soft yet strong, pellucid yet turbid—combined with the right movement—fluid but determined. And Victor Nuñez has the right camera to complement her: one that is mostly still, shuns excessive cutting, and uses the close-up sparingly; also one that, in the hands of the cinematographer Alex Vlacos, avoids the obvious trap of prettifying life on Florida's Gulf Coast by playing down the brilliance of its omnipresent sun and the picturesqueness of its natural locations.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Nuñez knows that Ruby is conducting a dialogue *with the world*, not simply with herself or other people, and that this world must be revealed and studied for itself, in all its phenomenal existence, alongside the human beings who inhabit it.

Having lived in northern Florida for more than ten years, I can tell you that Nuñez, himself a resident, has got the place exactly right: the languid pace and the enervating climate, the cultural vacuum and the geographical utopia, the promise of a better life and the reality of a life no better than it is anywhere else, the characters with native roots and the rootless characters who drift among them. Unfortunately, some of those characters in *Ruby in Paradise* are played by actors who are less effective than Ashley Judd, partly because, although as inexperienced as she, they are called upon to do the kind of "external" acting from which she is mostly exempted. I am thinking mainly of Allison Dean and Bentley Mitchum in the roles of Rochelle and Ricky, both of whom tend to force their moments in the company of the spontaneously serene, steadily spoken Miss Judd and as a result appear slightly amateurish. Nuñez does fairly well with the rest of the cast, however, especially Dorothy Lyman as the hardened but not heartless Mrs. Chambers and Betsy Douds as the spacey, unreflective Debrah Ann, Ruby's dramatic foil who lives (and fights) next door with two men.

The problem with the performances in *The Piano*, and as a consequence with the film itself, is that, as its title announces, it's more about an object—let us say the musical instrument as high-flown symbol—than about people. Unlike Victor Ñuñez, Jane Campion is interested less in the characters in her story than in the story in her characters, and the result is that her leading players—Holly Hunter, Harvey Keitel, and Sam Neill—are for the most part left to "act out" characters for themselves. It's no accident that Anna Paquin, who plays Hunter's nine-year-old, illegitimate daughter, won the Oscar for Best Supporting Actress: this threesome needed all the support it could get, although neither Paquin's preciousness nor Campion's artiness could give it to them. As usual, Hunter acts by grimacing and Keitel by smoldering; in other words, she overplays to his underplaying. Meanwhile, poor Sam Neill is reduced to the role of a performing seal, producing the quality of earnestness-cum-bafflement on demand.

The Piano tells the story of the Victorian Scotswoman Ada McGrath, who in 1850 travels with her daughter, Flora, and her beloved piano to an arranged marriage in the New Zealand outback. Ada is mute (but not deaf), and apparently by choice, though she sometimes confides to us on the soundtrack. Flora says that her mother has not spoken since the day Ada's father, a celebrated composer married to an opera singer, was struck by lightning in the forest and burned to death, but the presence—nay, dominance—of the piano suggests another reason for Ada's silence. After a rough passage by sea,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

mother and daughter are met on a remote beach by the Anglophile Stewart (Neill), a wealthy landowner who has contracted to marry Ada sight unseen, but he refuses to transport her piano back to his farm through the dense forest. This immediately alienates Ada from him at the same time that it draws her to Baines (Keitel), an illiterate English settler who acquires the piano from Stewart in exchange for eighty acres of land. (The piano has been sitting abandoned on the beach, too obviously a symbol on one level of Old-World civilization come to conquer the wilderness.)

What Baines wants, however, is not the piano but Ada, and he strikes a bargain in order to get her: if she will play for him, and allow him to play with her, he will eventually return the piano to her. (The hopeless Stewart thinks that Ada is giving Baines piano lessons during her visits to his cabin.) Their protracted playing leads to love and sex, despite the fact that she has married Stewart as planned; but it also leads to discovery by Ada's husband after Flora inexplicably betrays her mother's secret to this man who is neither father nor friend to her. An attempt at reconciliation fails, Ada tries to reestablish communication with Baines, and in revenge Stewart chops off one of her fingertips. Not long after this, she leaves by boat with Baines and her piano for Scotland (together with Flora, whom Ada unaccountably never confronts with her treachery). Along the way Ada instructs that the piano be thrown overboard and nearly drowns herself with it, but then elects to live and play again upon her return home, her severed finger newly tipped with silver. She also begins to speak with Baines's help, although her mind keeps returning to the eerie sight of her body anchored to the piano at the bottom of the ocean, her skirts billowing out into the vast, encompassing silence. With this, the final image, *The Piano*'s overwrought symbolism is complete.

The piano, of course, is Ada's symbolic voice, for which she composes her own (unprinted) music (which was actually composed by Michael Nyman in the lyrical but vexed style of late Romanticism). And we are to believe that she refuses to speak in protest against the Victorian male repression not only of her female sexuality and independence, but also of her professional or artistic ambition. Besides, as we all know, music can give vent to feminine feeling far better than logic-bound language can. Ada, or Ada's piano, thus comes to evoke Charlotte Brontë's "madwoman in the attic" and Mary Shelley's Frankensteinian monster: metaphors created in order to externalize the internal demons of their authors' anger; Ada herself resembles Catherine in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* in having to choose between the rigid but respectable Stewart and the primitive but passionate Baines; and Ada the thwarted female artist recalls not only Mary Ann Evans, the novelist who hid behind the masculine pseudonym George Eliot, but also Emily Dickinson, who after hearing the criticism from a man that her writing was simultaneously "uncontrolled" and "too delicate," never willingly allowed

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

publication of her poetry in her lifetime. By the end of *The Piano*, even though Ada appears to have found her "voice" with Baines, she still feels confined by men and marriage, bourgeois or otherwise—a confinement that is suggested throughout the film by the corset, hoop skirt, petticoat, pantaloons, and bonnet in which she must clothe herself. Hence Ada returns in her mind to what is paradoxically an image of liberation as well as suppression: herself alone beneath the sea, tied to the sunken piano yet with her skirts undulating freely.

The trouble with this seemingly approving analysis replete with analogies is that it presumes a taste for Gothic romance, which I do not have; that it implies Gothic romance—and newly fashioned Gothic romance at that—can speak for the late twentieth century as well as for the mid-nineteenth, which it can do only in the minds of febrile feminists; and, more than anything else, that it ignores the limitation of a form—in this film as well as in fiction—that relies too much on symbols and schemes, on atmosphere and emotion, to do the work of complex or probing characterization and thus of ramified meaning. To wit, the lush, primeval forest through which the piano, and later Ada, must pass in order to reach Baines's cabin is expected to account by itself for the tangle of forces that lurks beneath the surface of this couple's orgiastic relationship. The Maori tribesmen are smugly meant to symbolize the simple wisdom together with the earthy passion of indigenous peoples throughout the world, and by extension of the illiterate Baines himself,[2] whose nose is tattooed Maori-style and who lives in intimacy with these New Zealand natives (unlike the aloof, colonizing Stewart). The deep blue color that cloyingly shades much of the film, which was photographed by Stuart Dryburgh, is intended to suggest the Gothic undertow of gloom and horror that ultimately erupts in violent confrontation and haunted memory.

And then there's the piano itself, which wants to function as a symbol but can't even manage to exist as a simple reality in this, the most realistic of all artistic media: no piano could survive the battering and exposure to the elements sustained by Ada's rickety Broadwood, let alone sound like itself after a mere tuning. Nor, to shift the discussion to the subject of characterization, would a realistically as opposed to schematically depicted Stewart do nothing except spy upon discovering Ada in bed with Baines, but go so far as to cut off one of her fingers after learning of her attempt to send a mere message of love to Baines. Oh, I get it: it's the literal language of love

[2] Baines's illiteracy, together with his ability to speak Maori, is clearly designed to be a mark of superiority, a kind of breaking out from the elitist prisonhouse of the written (English) word. Unfortunately for Campion the Clever, she must use those same written words—English subtitles—to translate the Maori spoken during the film, as she must use them to translate the sign language that Ada employs in order to communicate with Flora, who serves as her prosaic mouthpiece to the world.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that offends the logocentric Stewart, not the act of love itself, about which this frigid patriarch knows so little yet, as voyeur, would learn so much. (In her rush to forge Significance, Campion forgets here that Baines can't read and therefore couldn't decipher Ada's note.)

Spare me, Jane Campion, and in the future remember: more matter, less art. I suggest that you stop reading books for a while—solipsistic autobiographies, Gothic novels, "women's literature"—and spend some time living in, and looking at, the world. Only then will your characters and your vision achieve the humanity and authenticity to be found in so apparently pedestrian a work as *Ruby in Paradise*, which of these two films is the real one about a woman who resists definition or colonization by men, and which proves yet again (as if it needed proving) that one need not be a woman in order to create meaningful female characters, or to tell a story from a "feminine" point of view. Victor Nuñez's movie will never outgross *The Piano* but will surely outlive it, and in the world of cinematic art, not artiness or artifice, not pop sociology or feminist politics, that is all that counts: surviving to be looked at, and lived through, again.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MARCIA B. SIEGEL

Giving Evolution a Nudge

EXCEPT FOR RARE OCCASIONS OF SUDDEN GENIUS, ballet evolves imperceptibly. Even those works which penetrate the existing façades of ballet style—Nijinksy's *Sacre du Printemps*, Balanchine's *Apollo*, Tharp's *Push Comes to Shove*—are usually seen, by enemies and adherents alike, as aberrations. Only after years or decades will it be determined whether they've had a real effect on the history of the art. In making the Diamond Project a biennial showcase, Peter Martins, head of the New York City Ballet, is trying to beat this slow process. The first installment acknowledged the irreparable loss the company had suffered nine years before with the death of George Balanchine, and seemed directed at finding new talent to feed the repertory. This year's Project was slightly different in aesthetics and in effect.

Although the same rules of minimal production expenditures and use of the classical vocabulary were imposed, it seemed, from the nine out of thirteen ballets I was able to see, that the experimentation was gelling into a "look." In fact, a new look may be more useful to the company at this point than specific new items in the repertory. Almost none of the last Diamond efforts were kept around for any length of time, and the new numbers don't make a much more compelling bid for longevity. If the Diamond Project proves anything, it is that the New York City Ballet has truly passed into a new phase, and Peter Martins seems determined to give this period its own identity—streamlined in ideas and visibility.

In the past year, conservative critics Arlene Croce and Joan Acocella have written at length about the deterioration of the Balanchine idiom at the NYCB. Balanchine's death naturally provoked an initial apprehension about the company's future. The extraordinary repertory Balanchine created, and the equally amazing dancers he trained to perform it, might decline and fall into a slushy anonymity that would be worse than disappearance. Under the direction of Peter Martins these dire things have started to happen. Probably even more dismaying to the preservationists, the NYCB now seems to have found a new audience, bigger, more diverse, and more vocal in its enthusiasms than anything known in Balanchine's time. It's strange to think that Lincoln Kirstein's often-stated dream of ballet for the masses may have finally come true.

Whether all this is a good thing or a bad thing seems to be the subject of the current critical debate. To me, this is like debating the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

value of Niagara Falls. Ballet and all dance does change over time. Unless it submits itself to the autocratic demands of a single artist, it will bend and stretch and spread out to accommodate forces that are far less clear in their needs. Its detail will gradually evaporate. The marketplace for ballet now constructs an aesthetics of fashion, status, political correctness, and physical rivalry that shifts as fast as the lead story on the 11 o'clock news. I think Balanchine ballet might satisfy this market as easily as anything else, and I'd much prefer to see his work, with its combination of challenges, than the mindless diversion that has taken over our dancegoing, but I don't think we have that choice.

I don't know how to account for their going out of style, except that the publicity mill grinds relentlessly. It needs new names, faces to be interviewed, hopeful young dancers and choreographers, all competing for attention in the media. The public doesn't seem to be much interested in whether these daily phenomena have a future, whether they actually do anything that matters. It's the process of doing, of existing, that makes them worthy. Peter Martins understands this temperament of immediacy; that's one of the things that makes him a modernist.

Anyway, Balanchine choreography isn't the same without the incisive edge, the finish, he got from dancers, just by being in the room with them and lending them his intensity along with his expertise. The best Balanchine dancing now seems to reside in the repertories of regional companies—Seattle, Miami, San Francisco, Boston—where it's supervised with more dedication and seen by a less jaded audience. New York City Ballet could serve this repertory splendidly if it created a small touring company that would concentrate on taking Balanchine around the country. This might raise the public's expectations for the art form. But even that might be called old-fashioned by provincials who believe what they read in the papers about the latest populist hits.

Peter Martins is banking on survival, which today in New York means recognition, novelty, and superb physical control. According to this year's crop of Diamonds, it also means extreme formalism, with modest eccentricities. In other words, narrative is out, stylistic allusion is out; dancing is everything. It almost seems as if ballet is reverting to the postmodern asceticism that modern dance went through twenty years ago. Balanchine's own formalism seems rich and varied compared to this season's dry virtuosics. The sensibility may go in one of two directions, "modern" and "classical." The modern ballets seem to require the dancers to look fierce, to be ready to fight each other; the classical ones are serene but sometimes kinky. There's a new palette of costumes—mostly designed by Holly Hynes: variants of practice clothes, in bold red/black/white combinations and shades of L. L. Bean sand-washed blue, green, purple.

The modern ballets, like Lynne Taylor-Corbett's *Chiaroscuro* and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Ulysses Dove's feverish *Red Angels*, feature struggles and distended body shapes splattered onto a classical step-foundation. *Chiaroscuro* treated all its six dancers as soloists, more or less democratically arranged around lead-soloist Jock Soto. They may have been aspects of his past life. He grappled with all of them in turn, sometimes with two or three of them at a time, while the others held the last pose he'd left them in. At the end there seemed to be no resolution or growth. The audience roared. In a softer vein, Anna Laerkesen's *In the Blue*, set to the entire Brahms Violin Concerto, had Wendy Whelan and Nikolaj Hübbe alternating between demonic and carefree moods, against a 12-person corps that made artistic body shapes and sudden stops and classical enchaînements. Neither Whelan nor Hübbe has a lot of charm, and they both had trouble bringing off the nonchalance that Laerkesen might have had in mind.

There were well-crafted classical ballets, Martins' *Mozart Piano Concerto* (No. 17, K 453), Miriam Mahdaviani's *Correlazione* (to Corelli), and Damian Woetzel's *Ebony Concerto* (Stravinsky). Each one recalled some more absorbing Balanchine precedent and made me think about the usefulness of genre in art. Balanchine's originality and his good fortune in having a stable company and school over the decades allowed him to sustain his body of work. Probably no one but dance professionals can appreciate how unusual it is to be able to see one work against another, to keep alive a chain of ideas, to take up unfinished themes, change directions. These are options that painters have available as a matter of course, but not dancers. Today especially, as evidenced by the Diamond Project, freelancing is the rule. Young choreographers can't count on dancers who know their ways, or predict with any assurance when or where they'll be able to do their next work. The fact that Balanchine was a prolific and versatile composer doesn't account alone for his pre-eminence. We recognize his genius partly as a potential he fulfilled through concentrated, developing work. And I suppose one reason we feel so bereft—still—by his loss, is that one always sensed an ongoing process with him. No matter how perfect an individual ballet was, there'd be another cooking in his brain, taking off from it or setting up a contrast, a new mood.

I guess Balanchine imitations demonstrate the solid values of order and virtuosity in a disorderly world, even when those values are imaginary. Actually, I liked Mahdaviani's piece for its asymmetricality. Recalling Balanchine's baroque-inspired *Tombeau de Couperin* and *Square Dance*, it avoided the almost obsessive evenhandedness of that particular Balanchine mode. (Balanchine himself had second thoughts about *Square Dance*, adding an expressionistic solo for the male lead when NYCB revived it in later years.) The subversion of traditional hierarchies and sequences was a major preoccupation of several of the choreographers. David Allan's *Pastoral Dances* seemed

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

rambling and fussy to me, though, while Trey McIntyre's *Steel and Rain* dwelt on posturing and petulance.

The most successful of the works I saw was *Viola Alone*, an unpretentious but surprising piece by Kevin O'Day, an alumnus of Ballet Theater, Twyla Tharp, and William Forsythe's Frankfurt Ballet. Made for four dancers, the ballet had many small virtues. It didn't announce itself all at once, and it didn't set up some flimsy decorum only to shoot it down. Even the music avoided cliché. The first two Hindemith viola sonatas were played by Paul Neubauer, in front of a curtain drawn partway across the back of the stage. Later the curtain was opened all the way to reveal pianist Cameron Grant, who accompanied Neubauer in a third sonata.

The dancers appeared one at a time, and when they encountered one another, they didn't always have the same partners. There was an intricate men's duet (for Damian Woetzel and Alexander Ritter) that did *not* bring to mind Balanchine's famous duo from *Agon*. There was a solo full of spectacular steps for Stacey Calvert, and one full of important stops for Melinda Roy. Mostly, though, the pace was fast and impatient. And I remember a stunning moment at the end of a long trio. Just as I had begun wondering where Roy was, Calvert and Ritter whisked out, and Woetzel seemed about to follow them. A second before he was gone, Roy spun out of the wings and into his arms. Without even seeming to pause, they continued her spiral out into the space and began another duet.

There was something convincing—contemporary—in O'Day's ballet that I didn't find in most of the others. His world was a place where nobody had any prior assumptions and surprise went unremarked, where an odd turn could be made useful, and where dancers could be happy together but also could carry on alone without resentment. It was all I needed of Meaning.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ROBERT S. CLARK

Music Chronicle

AS THE NEW YEAR BEGAN, Marilyn Horne and a group of fellow artists warmed a frigid January evening by gathering at Carnegie Hall to celebrate the popular American mezzo-soprano's sixtieth birthday. A concurrent purpose of the concert was to launch a foundation bearing Miss Horne's name, one dedicated to strengthening what she sees as the sagging fortunes of the solo vocal recital. Her foundation would bring young singers and presenting organizations across the country together and provide money to encourage study and public performance of the vocal repertoire. The notion was enthusiastically received by a near-capacity audience, and was presumably off to a solid financial start. The parade of accomplished singers, ranging from those in the morning of their careers (Ruth Ann Swenson and Renée Fleming) to those firmly established on the international roster (Frederica von Stade, Samuel Ramey and Helen Donath) demonstrated the delights the format can offer.

The solo appearance may indeed be threatened elsewhere, but the past winter testified to its continuing vitality in New York. Between the first of the year and the end of March, I was in the audience for four evenings of solo vocal music that rank with the most memorable of several decades, and I was surrounded by hundreds of equally grateful listeners.

The earliest of these was the German mezzo-soprano Brigitte Fassbaender's January recital at Alice Tully Hall. It was a remarkable experience in several ways. First, the artist dared to confine the program to 25 of the lieder of Hugo Wolf on poems of Eduard Mörike: a composer whose legacy of several hundred masterly songs, with a half-dozen or so exceptions, is paid lip service but languishes unheard, a poet whose work is close to arcane even in his native country, and an audience with only a passing acquaintance with the German language. Then there was her choice of Jean-Yves Thibaudet as pianist-partner, a young Frenchman associated with the virtuosic repertoire of Rachmaninoff, Liszt and Ravel (his mother is German, probably not incidentally).

In the event both decisions were amply justified. Mörike's poems and Wolf's musical response to them possess an imaginative scope and a breadth of mood, form, meter and expressive means unmatched by any other collaboration of poet and composer. These settings are early Wolf, most of them written when he was twenty-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

eight years old, and are not in the sometimes eviscerated, sometimes deliberately miniaturist style of the later Italian and Spanish songbooks. Their variety is manifold: they are strophic and through-composed, at times imitative of the folk ballads that so fascinated the German Romantics and at others completely idiosyncratic, the musical form dictated by the texts' emotional shape; they are about God and the godless, about erotic longing and the varieties of selfless love, about possession and loss, about nature and the introspective life. They are by turns impassioned, reverent, ironic, solemn and full of humor. As for Mr. Thibaudet, the piano parts of these songs often make severe technical demands, all of which he met with ease. More important, his fluency buoyed up Miss Fassbaender's carefully judged readings with a sophistication that never called attention to itself.

If Miss Fassbaender occasionally seemed a throwback to a lieder-singing style that flourished in the early decades of this century, she comes by it honestly: she is the daughter of the celebrated prewar German baritone Willi Domgraf-Fassbaender. She frequently called to mind the German mezzo-soprano Elena Gerhardt, who made some of the earliest recordings of Wolf songs in the twenties. Hers is not a vocal sound of much immediate appeal, though when she wants a caressing *legato* she manages to do it convincingly. Like Gerhardt, she puts adequate vocal equipment at the service of textual clarity and musical logic. Each of these compact musical tableaux had its own character and its own finish, some bright and shining, some burnished, some scarred and some heavy with portent. Exploiting the varieties of timbre, attack, *rubato* and volume at her command, she unveiled a teeming world.

On Valentine's Day, Helen Donath returned to the New York recital stage, this time to Lincoln Center's new and intimate Walter Reade Theater. Accompanied by her husband Klaus, a German conductor as well as a pianist, the American-born soprano devoted the evening to love songs. The composers were Schubert, Brahms, Pfitzner and Strauss; a core of the well-known—*Gretchen am Spinnrade* and *Liebe schwärmt auf allen Wegen* from Schubert, *Liebestreu* and *Meine Liebe ist grün* from Brahms, *Allerseelen* and *Du meines Herzens Krönelein* from Strauss—was counterweighted by a smattering of the seldom heard. (The Pfitzner choices fell somewhere in between: though rarely programmed these days, the songs Miss Donath offered were three of the composer's most familiar: *Hast du von den Fischerkindern*, *Ist der Himmel darum im Lenz so blau?*, and *Gretel*.) Even in the unflattering acoustic of the Reade, which after all was constructed as a venue for films, the ravishing tonal bloom and exceptional technical assurance of Miss Donath's singing were apparent. Her admirers can be forgiven for relishing the evening for her vocal quality alone, and perhaps equally for the adeptness of her manipulation of it. Yet her art is no mere indulgence in lovely sound. Though perhaps not as

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

keen to text as Miss Fassbaender, she puts her vocal means to work at storytelling.

Miss Fassbaender's expressive method embraces rough as well as subtle contrasts, abrupt shifts of gear along with delicate shadings. Miss Donath's practice is more like a continuum, a seamless ribbon of nuance, so that something like the sudden thrust on the word "*Falschheit*," against the exquisitely modulated *mezza-voce* tide of Brahms's *Da unten in Tale*, was startling and memorable. Later in the month, Miss Donath, framed by a vocally confident and artful group of colleagues in the Metropolitan Opera's production of *The Marriage of Figaro*, brought gifts to the role of the Countess the equal of which I have heard only once or twice in a lifetime. She is an artist to treasure.

Though born in Leningrad and a regular at the Kirov Opera, the baritone Sergei Leiferkus has roots in the soils of both Germany and the Baltic states. As if to reinforce his cosmopolitan credentials, while in town to sing a highly praised Iago (in Italian, of course) in tandem with Plácido Domingo's Otello at the Metropolitan, Leiferkus appeared at Tully Hall in a program that combined Robert Schumann with Modest Mussorgsky. Even conceding that some of his German vowels were oddly occluded, it is hard to think of another artist who could stake such a forceful claim in these three languages. Schumann's *Liederkreis*, Op. 39, on poems by Joseph von Eichendorff, confronts the performer with unique difficulties. Lacking the implicit narrative thread and explicit musical motifs that unify the same composer's *Dichterliebe*, the cycle's twelve poems can seem a random garland of Romantic posies shifting uneasily from the pretentious to the precious, unless the singer articulates their moods precisely and with conviction. This Leiferkus succeeded in doing, showing his skill at delicately spun medium-volume phrases. After intermission, Mussorgsky's *Songs and Dances of Death* were another matter: here, given the Russian's starker musical palette, Leiferkus made telling contrasts between hushed lyrical passages and the violence that marks Death's imperatives. The great final song, "Death the Field-Marshal," was truly harrowing in his rendering.

Leiferkus concluded the program with Mussorgsky's *Rayok* ("Heavenly Kingdom"), a set of satirical portraits of conservatory professors, critics and opera composers of his time, all counted among the enemies of his musical camp. It was a brave choice, because American audiences know little or nothing of this kind of musical prose, the unrelieved *parlando* characteristic of Mussorgsky in his polemical years before the commission for *Boris Godunov*. Leiferkus' command of the language conveyed as much of the effect of the work as could be expected in such alien circumstances, scoring best at such obvious moments as the extended repetitive word play on the name of Adelina Patti, a popular Italian soprano of the time. But only someone steeped in Russian culture could find it of more than passing

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

interest. Leiferkus was ably if somewhat crudely partnered by Semyon Skigin.

All of these singers are in their artistic maturity (symbolically, Miss Donath's Countess was her first essay of the role, she having just forsaken Susanna for it). It is a pleasure to report, therefore, that younger artists of the caliber of Jennifer Larmore continue to refresh the roster. At Walter Reade in late March, she made her New York recital debut in a program of arias and songs, most of them rarely, if ever, heard on the concert stage. An American mezzo-soprano reported to be in her mid-thirties, Miss Larmore has a sumptuous voice, and considerable technique and understanding to boot. It might have been expected that Italian would be the dominant language of the performance, for she has built her reputation to date on the Baroque and *bel canto* operas, balancing Handel and Monteverdi with Rossini and Donizetti. It was not so: she rendered two selections in English impressively at the outset, moved on to a French group by Fauré, Gounod and Rossini with flair, and closed with five brief Spanish songs in which she deployed the dark coloration of her voice to great effect. But the program did pivot on an Italian choice: *La canzone dei ricordi*, a long and ardent song cycle by the turn-of-the-century composer Giuseppe Martucci. Miss Larmore almost managed to make a *tour de force* of this somewhat intractable material, which mixes overheated late Romantic rhetoric in the vein of D'Annunzio with dollops of Puccini, Wagner and the early Impressionists. Though her success in bringing it to life was intermittent, the fault lay with the composer and poet, not with her vocal prowess and expressive intentions. As an encore, she displayed verve and easy command in "*Una voce poco fà*," a promise that her scheduled Metropolitan Opera debut next year as Rosina in Rossini's *Barber of Seville* should be an occasion to note. Her capable companion at the keyboard was Dalton Baldwin, whose refinement is not ideal for every situation but worked admirably in the bulk of this music.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

JOHN LOUGHERY

Uncharted Paths

MODERNISM IN AMERICA IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY was chock-full of quirky characters and unpredictable achievements: Charles Demuth, shuttling back and forth between the dives of Greenwich Village and his mother's cozy hearth in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, creating some of the most unnervingly beautiful watercolors in the history of the art form; Arthur Dove on his houseboat on the Hudson, impoverished and ignored, exploring the unseen rhythms and auras in nature; the imperious, calculating Georgia O'Keeffe; the visionary loner Marsden Hartley; the millionaire-eccentric Florine Stettheimer. High in that pantheon of talent and individuality is the portly Italian-American Joseph Stella, who at the start of his career must have looked like one of the last of the great nineteenth-century realists but ultimately proved to be something far different indeed. An exhibition which opened in April at the Whitney Museum of American Art was the first full-scale examination in almost three decades of Stella and his impressive, complex body of work. Moreover, the show was on view for more than five months, until early October—a long stay by the usual, rushed, hustle-bustle standards of museum scheduling, which happily allowed for many visits.

The Whitney has taken some hard knocks in recent years for its undisguised political slant, its narrow approach to contemporary painting, and the dismantling of its own permanent-collection galleries. But in our crankier moments we might remember that this is the same institution that brought the George Bellows and the William H. Johnson shows to New York of late, and where else would we have the chance to consider the accomplishments of a man like Stella who is not quite ingratiating enough to make it into the Metropolitan and played too free and easy with the "line" of classic Modernism to make it as the subject of a MoMA retrospective? For this was a man who was buddies with Marcel Duchamp and Walter Arensberg, an intimate of the New York Dada circle, but whose later works are a weird composite of the most outlandish religious and floral imagery you could imagine. This was an artist inspired by America's factories and bridges and the frenzy of Coney Island—our one and only Futurist—who also never lost his reverent feel for elegant drawing and delicate shadows. A man more interested in following his own bent than in repeating his successes. Clearly, an original, not someone who can be neatly pigeon-holed in the textbooks and the slide-show lectures, and the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Whitney couldn't have found a more pertinent contrast to the trendy, uniform Richard Avedons ensconced upstairs.

The arrangement of the floor devoted to the Stella show was unusual in itself in that we had to navigate many alcoves and small passageways rather than the traditional few large, open galleries. Given that Stella's career wasn't a seamless entity, with one period or manner of expression flowing into another, this odd set-up made sense; there was something choppy and disconnected to the separate phases of his art, and our experience of seeing the art at the Whitney reflected those unpredictable twists and turns. The first room displayed a large number of his drawings, crayon or charcoal, of immigrant faces and laborers' backs, bearded old men and dark mill interiors, most drawn in the decade after Stella's immigration to the United States in 1896 and all of a graphic skill (and sensitivity to eyes and facial lines) that is practically unmatched in American art. Nothing about these excellent drawings served as preparation for the next room, or stage in Stella's career, which dealt with his own vigorous interpretation of the new world he had adopted and its obsession with speed, growth, activity, and dynamic, sometimes pointless energy. New York City, for Stella, was at one and the same moment "a monstrous dream, chimeric reality, Oriental delight, [and] Shakespearean nightmare," and he knew that its essence circa 1913 wasn't going to be captured on canvas by making further use of the realism he had mastered under the tutelage of William Merritt Chase. *Luna Park* hangs on by its fingertips to the recognizable shapes of an amusement park, which have in turn been whirled out of *Battle of Lights, Coney Island, Mardi Gras* (1913-1914), a painting of pure color bombardment and hectically jiggled and jostled forms. In the third and fourth rooms we were back to the refinement of the drawings crossed with a new interest in emblems of American power: the glow of blast furnaces at night made into nocturnes, factories and smokestacks as modern icons, brooding presences not unlike the earlier immigrant faces.

If there is a slightly votive quality to the factory series, that idea of the potential holiness of man's handiwork—in the service of his own interests, not God's—is best expressed in what is often taken to be Stella's masterwork, *New York Interpreted (The Voice of the City)*. This colossally ambitious, five-paneled painting is owned by the Newark Museum and, in years past, was rarely on view there. As a result, it was one of the most famous early twentieth-century paintings known largely by reputation and in reproduction. At the Whitney, it was given its own room where Stella's quixotic, schematic treatment of the Battery, Broadway, the skyline, and the Brooklyn Bridge, mixed with structural elements of a Renaissance religious series, could state its own glowering case pretty effectively. To turn from *New York Interpreted*, which grabs the viewer by the throat (much like Manhattan itself) and demands a response, to the little room of unpretentious

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

collages next to it, was to be reminded yet again of how elusive or protean Joseph Stella could be. Heady blasts of rhetoric, a quiet concern for textures and fragments: there is no one, knowable "Joseph Stella."

The last section of the exhibition was filled with some even more improbable stuff. The room devoted to his silverpoint drawings contained a few of the best line-portraits in American art—Marcel Duchamp, Edgard Varese, and Louis Eilshemius have never looked more arresting—but Stella's version of the New Classicism that preoccupied some European artists after the First World War can take your breath away for sheer gaudy *chutzpah.* Tacky Madonnas surrounded (not to say suffocated) by floating orchids, fruit, palms, and swans, all jammed into a twilight-zone space and rendered in the most offensive colors, have a madcap, jokey quality to them that you *know the artist didn't intend. We enter a new, surprising and distress*ing level of kitsch here. Works like *Purissima* (1927) or *The Birth of Venus* (1925) or *Flowers, Italy* (1930) vie for the title of the ugliest painting ever made by a modern master. Yet, one then comes across something like the more elemental, less frenzied *Palm Tree and Bird* (1927), an image of more subtle colors and confident composition, and the skill of the painter of *Coney Island* and the factories is felt in the raw all over again.

A third and a fourth and a fifth visit to this exhibition, though, had the power to evoke an entirely different response, more attuned to Stella's needs than ours. I kept thinking of a Stella contemporary, Eugene O'Neill, who in my English-teaching days I used to try hard to do right by with my skeptical students. If we liked the early, lyrical sea plays and loved the late works like *Long Day's Journey into Night,* I'd proselytize, we'd have to accept something of all those crackpot gizmo 1920s dramas like *Dynamo* or *The Great God Brown.* No nutty *Strange Interlude* means no *Moon for the Misbegotten*; the same man gave us both, and he wanted—and needed—to work through certain odd themes and styles to become what he was, what he was meant to be. With Joseph Stella, too, we can find a bit heartless and narrow our own voracious aesthetic-consumer approach: give us more masterpieces and give them to us in the mode our time demands. But Stella wasn't a creative machine, a dutiful worker, any more than O'Neill was. We have to see him whole. We have to accept that the kinks go along with the talent and the craft. He was a strange, gifted individual who let his imagination roam where it would and, as we learned at the Whitney, the result was an intelligent, unpredictable body of art that could only have been created by a temperament prone from the start to searching extremes.

For most Americans, the Renaissance brings to mind the great painters of Italy with some vague experience of, say, Dürer or El Greco. Exhibitions of the art of Northern Europe circa 1400-1650

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

have always been less common here, which is one reason why last year's "Age of Rubens" show at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts was so noteworthy an endeavor. Of equivalent importance and interest this year was the exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum entitled "Petrus Christus: Renaissance Master of Bruges." At first glance, this show had an annoying, low-priority look to it; descending the stairs to the underground level of the museum's Lehman wing, I tried to remember the last time I had seen a "major" exhibition in the corridors of this decidedly unglamorous basement space. But the experience turned out to be anything but minor or haphazard. Three-quarters of Petrus Christus' known works were brought to New York for this show, and the use of three hallway walls rather than a gallery proper to display them allowed for ample chance to study the paintings at close range, to step back and take a seat for a few minutes (lots of chairs in the Lehman wing), and then to wander back to the wall without the usual heads in the way or clusters of viewers uncertain which way to proceed. What a novelty to come to the end of a show and not be forced into the postcard/shopping bag "No Re-entry, Please" cul-de-sac, but to be able to go round once again in the circle of the Lehman wing.

To the extent that Petrus Christus has been known at all to people interested in European art in America, he has been thought of as a kind of lesser Jan van Eyck. And, though he was never a formal student of van Eyck, the similarities are striking. But the purpose of the Metropolitan's focus on the lesser known Flemish artist was to see that he came into his own in our estimation, and that he does. The precision and attention to meaningful or metaphorical detail expected in Flemish art is there—the wonderful *trompe-l'oeil* fly at the bottom of *Painting of a Carthusian* (1446), the many deftly rendered objects in the goldsmith shop of *Saint Elgius* (1449)—but we also encounter in Petrus Christus a manipulation of space and unostentatious complexity in his compositions that is remarkable even by the high standards of the time and the region. It is hard to believe, as the new scholarship appears to conclude, that Petrus Christus hadn't been to study in Italy, so secure is his gradual introduction of one-point perspective into his paintings of the 1450s and 1460s. Culminating works like *Death of a Virgin* (1460) and *Holy Family in a Domestic Interior* (1470) have a drama and intensity—of brushstroke and composition, psychology and faith—that strike a new note in Renaissance religious art. It is interesting to reflect on the fact that the latter painting is in the Metropolitan Museum's own collection, but sometimes it isn't until a complete context is established for an artist that the magnitude of a given work can really lodge in the mind.

In a time of divisive debate on the question of museum policies about the exhibition of art along racial lines, one workable solution lies with the ambitious private collector who sends his treasures out

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

into the world, sharing the wealth as he or she chose to accumulate it. No, make that a respite from the debate—not a solution. Each community and museum will eventually have to take a stand on the issue, one way or the other. In the meantime, a show like the display of Walter O. Evans' collection of African-American art at the Delaware Art Museum in Wilmington last spring provided occasion for more thought on the subject while offering a number of purely aesthetic pleasures for those who want their art divorced from politics or history.

Evans is a Detroit surgeon who has been collecting art for the last thirty years or so. He has a good eye and a flexible sense of his mission. Despite a wall plaque noting his interest in collecting only works that reflect black life or ideology, he obviously decided at some point to broaden his base because one strength of the collection is in the nineteenth-century landscapes he owns. Absolutely no one could tell from looking at the paintings of Robert Edmund Duncanson or Edward Mitchell Bannister that these were the work of black men, though an ideological point could be drawn from that fact as well, I suppose. Namely, what African-American images could Duncanson or Bannister have treated on canvas in the 1850s and 1860s if he wanted to sell his pictures? That they belong in such a context, these two talented men, is clear; capability, mastery of craft, has got to be a starting point for any serious collection. Indeed, I've seen a fair number of paintings by both artists in recent years and they usually struck me as only craftsmanlike, almost lifelessly academic. But two of the three Duncansons here, most especially the Luminist *Flight of the Eagle* (1856), are among the best I know, and even Bannister's cloud-packed skies and greenery looked livelier than other examples of his art that I've seen. Henry O. Tanner's landscape with orange trees, *Florida* (1890), is one of his best and stood out as such at the Tanner retrospective at the Philadelphia Museum three years ago.

Evans has collected some of the great, obvious figures of African-American art—most notably, Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden—and some superb examples of Aaron Douglas' works on paper and a great variety of interesting Depression-era portraits and genre scenes, like Eldzier Cortor's *Night Letter* (1938) and Archibald Motley's *The Plotters* (1939). The latter is an especially dramatic, cleverly stylized painting of five black men at a cafe table hashing out a deal that has something to do with an upcoming boxing match, to judge from the cropped picture of a boxer on the wall to the right. Theirs is a shadowy world of blue-black flesh and dark suits and glowing, reddish-brown faces intent on the business at hand. Tapered fingers clasp cigarettes or shot glasses, one arm is aggressively stretched across the table to make a point, and the faces in this tight space are arranged so that no one quite seems to be looking anyone else in the eye during this shady confab. To my taste, the Evans collection becomes a little less dynamic as it enters the postwar years—how

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

nicely an Alma Thomas abstraction or a Norman Lewis would fit here—and I found myself hoping that I'd come across a flamboyant Frederick Brown portrait or an in-your-face Robert Colescott before reaching the end. Yet the formation of a private collection is an intensely personal concern, governed by taste and finances and timing (rather like childrearing), and in a sense, the more solipsistic it is the better. How dull those fastidiously balanced one-of-every-Big-Name private collections have become, dutifully sent on their museum tours to show the owner's knowledge of the canon. Good going: one Pollock, one Warhol, one de Kooning. Pat on the back.

All of which brings me to Archibald Motley and those sleek, menancing, expertly painted "plotters." Positively the best thing that can happen in a first experience of any private collection is an encounter with a new artist or even a single new picture that is stimulating enough to evoke several responses at the same time: i.e., a thrill that is wholly aesthetic, a desire to single this work out and to see it repeatedly, intense curiosity about the artist himself (why have I never heard of him?), incredulity that he or she isn't a part of the usual texts. Motley was that figure for me in Wilmington. (I have since discovered that Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson devote several informative pages to Motley in their excellent new survey of African-American art and that the dust jacket of David Levering Lewis' just published *The Harlem Renaissance Reader* makes use of one of his oils). To slide back, then, from the artistic to the art-political: my experience of Archibald Motley's fine picture struck me as a perfect example of why we do need some careful attention to art on the basis of race. The questions are only how much, for how long, in what context. Because it would be extremely disingenuous to pretend that we'd ever see this or similar paintings otherwise. A standard museum survey of American art from the 1930s, for instance, will give us Thomas Hart Benton, Ben Shahn, William Gropper, Hans Hoffman, Edward Hopper, Georgia O'Keeffe, *whoever*—but not by a long shot anyone like Archibald Motley. And that happens for a very simple reason. No one is more afraid of appearing random and idiosyncratic, uncertain of the "right" names and movements, than museum curators. So we do well to rely for the moment on discerning collectors like Dr. Evans to scout out the byways for us, setting aside what we already know too well, teaching us what we don't know well enough, rescuing paintings like Motley's *The Plotters* from an unfair obscurity.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

KAREN WILKIN

Caro at Seventy: An Overview

ONE OF THE MOST COMPELLING SHOWS IN NEW YORK last spring was Anthony Caro's exhibition of recent sculpture, held in honor of his 70th birthday at André Emmerich Gallery. That Caro once again produced a body of powerful, exciting work is hardly news; what was surprising was not the authority of his recent efforts, but their severity, their density, their monumental heft, and their overtones of reference—in short, their difference from the lean, drawing-like painted steel constructions that established his reputation more than thirty years ago. It's as though instead of settling quietly into the role of Grand Old Man of modernist sculpture, Caro decided to celebrate his milestone birthday by dismantling most of his earlier assumptions about what sculpture might be, in a burst of youthful innovation. The intelligence and toughness of the new works was notable; their reckless daring was overwhelming.

The solemn, near-geometric volumes seemed pregnant, even ominous. Many of the works in the show were almost entirely closed, permitting us only strictly controlled glimpses into their interiors. The crouching, conical *Delphi*, 1993, allowed us to peer between its overlapping, seductive plates, revealing its intimate, shadowy inner space as a kind of sanctuary. A similar mood was achieved by different means in its squared-off relation, *Marathon*, 1993, a sturdy cell whose entry is barred, physically but not visually, by implacable bars and giant links of anchor chain. (Despite its name, *Delphi* was less evocative of the renowned oracle, seated on her tripod, than of a tholos tomb, or that marvelous, embracing tent in Piero della Francesca's fresco *The Dream of Constantine*.) In the fantastic golden "shrine," *The Caliph's Garden*, 1989–92, gleaming brass kept the eye skimming over elegant "vaults," openings defined by massive loops, like sublime ductwork, and a skewed, framing "court." At once object and place, the sculpture demanded that we perceive it as we would a building, by reading the exterior for clues to what we might find inside. Other works were like archeological sites or ruined buildings, without appearing miniaturized or like maquettes; we could see into spaces perhaps once roofed or enclosed, now exposed to view, mentally transporting ourselves into the sculptures. The clear-sighted sureness that comes with forty years of sculpture-making was manifest in these works, but so was an astonishing sense of discovery, so much so that several well-informed observers told me that if they hadn't known it

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was Caro, they would have assumed a new voice was asserting itself for the first time.

Yet Caro has been a restless, protean figure from the start, albeit a stubborn one, consistent in his inconstancy, refusing a single approach, a single material or method, a single conception of form. "The pendulum can be all the way over here, at an extreme of openness and drawing, or all the way over *here*, at an extreme of density, or anywhere in between," he once said, during a discussion with younger artists eager to establish limits for themselves, and more recently, "I don't like doing the same thing over and over again; it's too boring."

Over the years, Caro's work has made clear his curiosity, his appetite for the unexpected, and his willingness to take risks. If one end of the pendulum's swing is marked by the sculptures that first declared his presence in the 1960s—athletic steel constructions of I-beams, narrow bars, and flat planes, painted in clear, bright colors—the opposite end is marked by his massive, brooding works of the last few years. And he has explored virtually everything in between, testing how much he could simplify a structure and still force our attention, probing the boundaries of complexity. He has floated gravity-defying "drawings in space" before us, confronted us with impassable doorways and sensuous walls of soft-edged steel, questioned our innate perceptions of scale and poise, pushed us back and beckoned us to enter. Some sculptures have been paradigms of linearity, strictness, and horizontality, while others, no less lucid, have been as freewheeling and unpredictable as an explosion. Some, built of widely separated parts, appear held together by the kind of tension generated by dancers at opposite sides of a stage—or by sheer force of will—while others are as corporeal and concentrated as a human presence. Some are literally, as well as metaphorically transparent, incorporating "now you see them, now you don't" planes made of metal mesh, while others, particularly the most recent, are about enclosure, sometimes visually (and occasionally literally) enterable, sometimes opaque, impenetrable, except by the imagination.

But Caro's recurring obsessions have also been plain. How does gravity affect us? How do we inhabit our bodies? How do we perceive our surroundings? And above all, how can these questions be asked in purely visual, but unignorable ways, in objects that are abstract but, in Caro's words, "real" and "alive"? These preoccupations have informed all of his work, from his chunky figures of the 1950s, to his first abstract steel constructions of the 1960s, to the large-scale volumetric works of the past decade. They are abundantly present in the most recent sculptures, in for example, one of Caro's masterpieces, the mysterious, impassive *Night and Dreams*, 1990–91, a four-square steel behemoth, balanced somewhere between massive Victorian furniture and architecture, resonant as a thunderclap. But they can be found, too, in the seminal works of Caro's mature career, such

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

as the Museum of Modern Art's brilliant yellow *Midday*, 1960, a low-lying, angled I-beam, studded with rows of emphatic bolts, that presents us with a trio of smaller, effortlessly poised beams.

What links these diverse sculptures is their reliance on the expressive power of a purely sculptural language, or what Michael Fried has called Caro's abstract "syntax": how elements touch one another, how forms meet the ground, how they address one another across space, and so on. It was, in part, the sculptural purity, the *abstractness* of Caro's first mature works that made them so startling when they were first exhibited. They remain so today, more or less defining the legacy of open construction derived from Cubist collage, via the welded iron heads and figures of Picasso and Gonzalez, and the allusive, highly charged abstract works of David Smith. Caro drew on this inheritance, but he expanded it, not only by moving further away from the subtle figurative allusionism of Smith, but also by removing his sculptures from the isolating base, and placing them in the same space that we all inhabit. Since nothing about their location signaled that Caro's constructions were art and not, in Arthur Danto's phrase, "mere real things," they were forced to declare themselves entirely by their otherness from anything we commonly encountered in the everyday world. Yet while these potent objects looked like nothing but themselves, they appeared to distill into their unprecedented forms all of our experience of our own bodies, of how we move through space, reach across voids, strain upwards, or bend. Paradoxically, they also contradicted that experience; the trajectories through space that they described seemed unfettered by gravity, as though pointing to a freer, more spontaneous kind of existence.

Caro's smaller "table pieces," made to explore the difference between our perceptions of things that can be picked up and things that can't, translated the potent kinetic qualities of the larger works into a more intimate, domestic context. The earliest table pieces declared the presence of the lifting hand by incorporating real handles, dislocated and divorced from function. Like their larger fellows, the table pieces, too, disregarded the constraints of gravity, the condition of being *on* something, by sliding over the edge of the table or projecting into space.

This was all in dramatic contrast to Caro's earliest sculptures, a series of roughly modelled, expressionist figures that won him a good deal of attention when he first exhibited them. They were, Caro said later, about "being inside the body," a condition that for him entailed being oppressed by gravity. His robust nudes strain to sit, to push themselves up, to pull on a shirt. Caro had become dissatisfied with these works, despite their successful reception, because, he said, he found that "the figure got in my way. I wanted to make something that was as real as a chair or a table, but wasn't a chair or a table. So I was pushed towards abstractness."

Caro's first visit to the U.S., in 1959, provided the catalyst for

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

change. In New York, he renewed his acquaintance with Clement Greenberg, who had made a thought-provoking visit to Caro's London studio, and through him met such innovators as Helen Frankenthaler and David Smith. In Washington, on Greenberg's advice, Caro looked up a young painter, a close friend of Smith (and Caro's exact contemporary) whose radiant color paintings seemed to point to a new direction in American abstraction. Kenneth Noland was to have a powerful influence on the young sculptor's direction; his energy and improvisatory approach impressed Caro greatly and confirmed his own desire for change.

The intensity and daring of what he saw in America, along with Greenberg's observation, "if you want to change your art, change your methods," led Caro to abandon everything he knew and begin to work in steel, on his return to England. The result: the series of audacious sculptures that includes *Midday*. (Greenberg was proved right; changing methods not only permitted—or obliged—Caro to eliminate the last vestiges of figural reference from his work and to alter dramatically his formal language, but also transformed his sense of how we occupy space; witness the steel sculpture's apparent liberation from gravity.) The critic Michael Fried, who was living in England at the time, became, like Greenberg, an early champion of these works and like Greenberg, too, a valued visitor to the studio; other perceptive viewers soon shared their enthusiasm and the young sculptor's place among the luminaries of the 1960s was assured.

If Caro had made nothing other than his painted steel works, he would still be regarded as someone who irrevocably altered our notion of what sculpture can be. But he has continued to challenge himself, and to question even his most hard-won solutions, in part by making himself respond to new conditions, and new formal and material possibilities. Since the mid-1970s, Caro has courted situations that keep him off balance. He has repeatedly disrupted his work patterns, travelling to work in steel factories, at artists' workshops, with students and younger sculptors, in improvised studios, and, for the last decade, part time in an upstate New York barn as a foil for his usual Camden Town studio in London, using clay, silver, paper, lead, bronze, wood, stainless steel, brass, scavenged industrial parts, and new sheets of steel.

Each shift in method or of location has elicited a shift in sculptural invention, yet no matter how much the course of Caro's evolution reflects his response to the possibilities of his materials and the character of his surroundings, his dialogue with other art and artists has been equally, if not more important. Surprisingly, his most fruitful exchanges have not been primarily with sculptors and sculpture, but with painters and paintings. There are exceptions: a long-standing fascination with Donatello and with classical Indian carving, a newfound enthusiasm for early Greek sculpture, his encounter with David Smith's work, on his first American trip. Caro

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

worked as Henry Moore's assistant in the early 1950s, and always speaks warmly of Moore, but it seems to have been the older sculptor's library, rather than his work, that had the greatest effect on the younger man, serving as Caro's introduction to much that he hadn't encountered in his strict, traditional education as a sculptor at the Royal Academy Schools. Caro's recent comments on Matisse illuminate his relationship to painting. "I've often looked to Matisse's paintings for clues to how to put a sculpture together," Caro said. "I like his sculpture, but it has never interested me in the same way as his painting." Certainly, we can find echoes of Matisse's works in Caro's sculptures—the exuberant shapes of the cutouts, the play of rounded and geometric forms of the Museum of Modern Art's *Moroccans*, 1915–1916—and he clearly responded strongly to the work of his contemporaries, Noland, Frankenthaler, and Jules Olitski, especially during the early sixties, when Caro and Olitski taught at Bennington College and Noland lived close by, at a farm formerly owned by Robert Frost. The three eager young artists looked intently at one another's work and talked intensely about art. Frankenthaler, Smith, and Greenberg, among others, were regular visitors.

Not long ago, Caro described "the Bennington years" as the time when "we helped make one another what we are now," and there is abundant evidence of fertile exchange. The floating horizontal bars of Caro's *Prairie*, for example, can be read as three-dimensional equivalents of the parallel bands of Noland's *Stripe* paintings, just as the vertical planes and outlined "doorways" of Caro's large-scale works of the 1970s seem indebted to Frankenthaler's spreading pools of color and to Olitski's luminous expanses, with their delimiting edge-drawing. Perhaps Caro's most significant connection with a painter, however, has been with Sheila Girling, an inventive abstract artist with a considerable reputation in Great Britain. Girling, with her exacting eye, has been an indispensable presence in Caro's studio since they met—and married—while still in art school.

Oddly, though, Caro's use of color has never seemed to have much to do with his friendships with painters. A collaboration with Noland produced nothing that satisfied either artist. It's possible to overestimate the importance of color in Caro's work, since the polychromed sculptures of the 1960s are so powerful and so familiar, but there are, in fact, relatively few painted pieces. Since the early seventies, Caro has rarely used chromatic color, and not entirely because he admires the visual properties of steel. "I was never really very interested in color," Caro said recently. "I'm really mainly interested in *form*."

There have been other startling revelations in Caro's work in the past few years—overt acknowledgments of specific sources in sculptures based directly on paintings by Rubens and Manet, or made in an effort to distill into abstractness the pediment sculptures of Olympia. Asked about these references, Caro says simply, "I feel freer now than I did thirty years ago. The language of abstraction is so well estab-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

lished that it doesn't have to be defended in the same way. In the past, it seemed that if a sculpture was to be alive, to be *real*, it couldn't look like anything else. I used to worry that my sculptures might remind you of something. Now I don't mind if they do."

The most recent manifestation of this freedom is a series of clay, steel, and wood sculptures, the result of a collaboration with a ceramist in the South of France. Collectively titled *The Trojan War*, the pieces are identified as specific persons, places, and things: Agamemnon, Thanatos, Ares, Mt. Ida, the chariot of Achilles. Is Caro "reverting" to figuration? Hardly. *The Trojan War* was a response to a particular set of circumstances and particular materials, filtered through, among many other associations, the memory of a trip to Greece, which left extremely strong impressions, and the *Iliad*, via an alert attention to possibilities that arise in the course of working, as expressions of inner compulsions. Caro's previous "reversion" to figuration, a series of bronze nudes made in the mid-eighties, was provoked by a comparably specific situation: the life drawing sessions at the international artists' workshop founded by the sculptor. The model, a combination of Maillol and Lachaise, interested him so much that he drew her repeatedly and then decided to make sculptures of her. It's significant that Caro regards the bronze figures as a parenthesis in his dominant pursuits and that he seems as surprised by *The Trojan War* as anyone else. "But when the ceramic pieces arrived in the studio in London from France," he says, "they simply *were* heads."

These forays into figuration are not changes of direction, but rather points along the trajectory of Caro's pendulum, alternatives that coexist with his wholehearted commitment to abstraction, but do not supplant it. In the same way, the linear, delicate *Barcelona* sculptures, of 1987–88, coexist with the massive, volumetric works of the same period. Caro's recent sculptures make it plain that what has increasingly absorbed his attention in the past decade is not only abstraction, but a growing fascination with issues more usually associated with architecture than with sculpture—questions about the relation of interior and exterior, about how we perceive and experience forms and spaces, about scale, and much more. He has described some of his sculptures of the past ten years as spatially "conceived from the center outwards." They are meant to be entered and climbed through, to be perceived, as well, "from the center outwards."

The first of these "architectural" pieces, the large wooden *Child's Tower Room*, was part of a series of fully three-dimensional environments commissioned from British artists by the Arts Council, in 1983. But the spiraling tower has its origins in a group of 1981 bronzes, like stacks and trains of ample volumetric forms, originally "vessels" thrown in clay, then sliced, altered, cast in bronze and assembled as directly as Caro would have any found object in steel. And, in fact, Caro's concern for internal volumes, for what he has called "what it *felt* like to be inside a space" (an important concomitant of "what it *felt*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

like to be inside the body") is nothing new. He has a long history of finding provocation in architecture and of friendships with architects. He has cited as "sources of inspiration" the rock-cut churches of Cappadocia, the fantastic overscaled astronomic observatory in Delhi, prehistoric tombs, and aspects of architects as diverse as Hawksmoor, Gaudi, and Corbusier.

The notion of being able to enter a sculpture, of requiring physical, rather than visual penetration for full understanding of the form, has engaged Caro deeply. (When he taught sculpture to architecture students, in the 1960s, he had them make hollow plaster models, large enough to allow entry of a viewer's head, and observe them from the inside.) A 1987 collaboration with the architect Frank Gehry, at Caro's workshop, produced a temporary, rambling "sculpture-village," with enterable rooms and walkways, a project Caro now feels was a failure, yet it led to a group of enterable, potentially habitable, large-scale constructions, which he refers to only half-facetiously as "sculpitecture." How successful they are as sculpture is open to discussion—their implications have been realized most provocatively in subsequent, less literal works—but they are important for their examination of the broadest possible meaning of the word "structure." They adapt and transform the familiar vocabulary of building, detaching method from context, altering size relations, and forever changing the way we look at both sculpture and buildings.

Caro's most recent sculpture, which is unequivocally some of his best and most evocative, turns these explorations into potent metaphors. The new works are enclosures that we enter neither visually nor physically, but only in the mind's eye. The staggering mass of the observatory, the full geometry of a Hawksmoor cupola, the bulk and thrust of an Indian temple, the mystery and compactness of an ancient tomb are all somehow present in Caro's recent sculptures, but in almost subliminal ways. Just how *Night and Dreams*, with its blank planes and hopper-like center manages to evoke images as disparate as Indian architecture and neoclassical formal space, in wholly sculptural terms, remains inexplicable.

What truly distinguishes Caro's recent works is their unignorable presentness, an inwardness that nevertheless affects everything in its vicinity, like an electric charge. The force of Caro's unmistakable personality and his distinctive touch are present, but in the service of a kind of narrative, a wordless commentary about being human, about being sentient, about inhabiting this planet, that has been present in his work from the start. Where the earlier work had to do with our perceptions of our own bodies, with acceptance of the pull of gravity or defiance of that pull, the recent works are about essentially human needs: shelter, enclosure, retreat, even about the possibility of the sacred. But none of this can really be described. Like all of the best art, Caro's elicits silence as its most sincere tribute. Happy birthday, Tony, and many more.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A SELECT **HUDSON REVIEW** PUBLICATION

Poems by Ghalib

translated by
AIJAZ AHMAD
with
WILLIAM STAFFORD
and
ADRIENNE RICH
forenote by
AIJAZ AHMAD

This vintage **Hudson Review** publication of 20 ghazals by renowned Urdu poet Ghalib marked the Ghalib Centennial Year, 1969–70. This book of noted translations by William Stafford and Adrienne Rich is available in its original edition for $2. ORDER NOW!

ADDRESS ORDERS TO:
The Hudson Review, *684 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10021.*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD

That Shakespeherian Rag

EVERY SO OFTEN A BOOK COMES ALONG that, although less than a pleasure to read page by page, justifies itself as an important anatomy of unhealthy practices in the stockyards of contemporary lit crit.[1] The reason Brian Vickers' formidable tome, which takes apart five "schools" of recent Shakespeare criticism, is sometimes frustrating going has to do with its scrupulousness as critique: in order for him to make the telling points he makes against exponents of the different schools, he has to lay out their approaches to the plays. This takes time and makes us wish occasionally we were reading *Henry V* or *The Winter's Tale* instead of being dragged through what this new historicist or that cultural materialist has to say about them. Nevertheless, *Appropriating Shakespeare* is a salutary job of sweeping up and marking as disposable a lot of stuff that's been choking the life out of Shakespeare's art as it struggles to maintain itself in our Age of Theory.

The schools Vickers names are five: Deconstruction, New Historicism, Psychocriticism, Feminist, and (both treated in one chapter) Christian/Marxist. He deals with them under an assumption which, most assuredly, those sympathetic to any of the above movements will find hopelessly naive and out of date: namely, that there was a time, not so many decades ago, when the criticism of Shakespeare was essentially "literary." In that climate the interested student could find a wide range of books and articles

> devoted primarily to interpreting the plays in a modern critical-analytical way, with varying emphases on their historical context. There were a few obviously political or ideological critics . . . but otherwise criticism was essentially literary, concerned with the plays' structure, language, moral values, theatrical history.

This has all changed as the fragmentation of literary studies into fiefdoms and bailiwicks has given us various competing groups determined to appropriate Shakespeare: "Each group has a specific ideology, a self-serving aim of proving the validity of their own approach by their readings of the text. Shakespeare's plays, for so long the primary focus of the critic's and scholar's attention, are now

[1] APPROPRIATING SHAKESPEARE: Contemporary Critical Quarrels, by *Brian Vickers*. Yale University Press. $45.00.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

secondary, subordinated to the imperialism and self-advancement of the particular group." Fighting words, and Vickers may be too easy on Shakespeare critics predating the current appropriators—as if every previous book or essay on the dramatist manifested only disinterested concern for his work and was free of professional aggrandizings and self-advancings. Still, I'm convinced that he's mainly right, and that the loss, in these current schools, of "literary" motives and practices is a loss to the reading and teaching of Shakespeare (and not of Shakespeare only).

Vickers holds further that recent critics have aligned themselves all too easily with attitudes derived from what a friend of mine refers to as The French Liars of the late 1960s: Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, and Lacan. Vickers thinks it incumbent upon himself to give an account of the historical movement in which each flourished, so that readers can identify the ideas from which recent approaches derive; thus we get one chapter of 163 closely-packed pages on "The Diminution of Language: Saussure to Derrida," and a second one in which Vickers runs through the work of the four theorists mentioned above. He argues that many of the assumptions and tenets by which language became diminished, suspect, wholly untrustworthy—assumptions inherited by the new schools of Shakespeare critics—derive from misinterpretations, on the part of the Parisian sages (or liars) of Saussure. I hope it's not just that mention of that name invariably causes my consciousness to glaze over, but I'm not convinced Vickers was wise to spend quite so much time in explicating the post-Saussurians. No doubt a specialist in any or all of these writers would argue with or reject Vickers' interpretations—though, to a non-specialist like myself they seemed sensible and fair-minded, if acerb. He points out the paradox that these thinkers don't—as does, say, Wittgenstein—invoke the "normal, everyday experience of speaking and understanding." Even though they knew about the untrustworthy slippages of the signifier, they continued "tirelessly publicising their ideas, writing and speaking at great length, and thus showing an untiring faith in the powers of language to persuade, impose, deceive, confuse, convince . . ." Their assertions, Vickers claims, "were mere assertions, not even theories about language," and these assertions did not derive from responsible analysis of forms of discourse (such analysis he finds, for example, in John Searle and Wendell Harris). He sums it up pungently and combatively by pointing to, in the French critics, "a metalanguage that displays coherence while claiming that the object language is incoherent." This for him "may stand as an ironic comment on the artificiality and futility of the whole tradition, which ought by now to be seen for what it is, a dead-end." To help us see that dead-end, Vickers journeys once more into the breach.

His book stands or falls not by its survey of the progenitors of what he calls Current Literary Theory, but by the convincingness of the cases he mounts against Shakespeare criticism actually produced by

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

various practitioners. Since these cases amount to a detailed point by point arguing with particular critics, it's difficult for a reviewer—two places removed from the critic in question and three from the Shakespearean text—to give an adequate sense of Vickers' success. Yet at least the flavor of his criticism may be suggested. For example, he points out how often the targets of contemporary critics as well as their 1960s progenitors seem unreal—"straw men, opinions that have been manufactured only to be attacked." A strategy of this game is to divide things into two categories, the first of which (the bad, outmoded one) represents "some absurdly stupid or superficial point of view, to be mocked with withering scorn, and replaced by [the second], in all respects superior." In his discussion of deconstructive approaches to Shakespeare, he lights upon Terence Hawkes, an academic Brit with a penchant for "lively" writing and a wish to popularize and publicize Decon's procedures. Announcing that the implication of these procedures for the Shakespeare critic are "vast," Hawkes tells us we must abandon "Bradley's notion of reading poetry as a pathway to the final 'presence' of the author's mind," adding that "Bradley's sense of the capacity of the text to reveal 'character' is also doomed by it." Hawkes goes on to pontificate:

> Precisely because of its tropes, its metaphors, its images, language cannot be reduced to a series of unified, graspable, "readable" and authorially validated meaning. *It certainly cannot accurately depict character* [Vickers' italics]. Texts are never accurate or finished or concluded. They are endlessly, like language itself, in free play. . . . As Hillis Miller puts it, all texts are unreadable, if by "readable" one means a single definitive interpretation.

Vickers' long commentary on this passage, only part of which I quote, begins as follows:

> There we meet many of the familiar characteristics of deconstruction; the categorical assertions . . . the proliferation of inverted commas to mark suspect words or concepts [in another place he remarks that they're used like aftershave], the caricature of opposed critical practices in an attempt to legitimate its own.

He points out—as anyone would, encountering A.C. Bradley's name in this connection—that Bradley's great *Shakespearean Tragedy* was published in 1904 and is therefore a pretty ancient approach against which to prove Decon's superiority. Vickers doesn't say, though he knows it, that the language-focussed Shakespeare criticism of this century's earlier decades—by among others F.R. Leavis, L.C. Knights, Cleanth Brooks and Maynard Mack—routinely used Bradley as a whipping boy in their attempt to redirect criticism away from Shakespeare's characters and onto his words. But these critics had the legitimate excuse that Bradley was then a force, somebody to argue

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

with—as he is now no longer, although his book is still marvelous to read. As for assertions of Hawkes's like "It [Shakespeare's language] certainly cannot accurately depict character," Vickers italicizes but doesn't analyze the outrageousness of such a pronouncement. What is it outside of Shakespeare's words, one might ask, that *can* "accurately depict character"? Whoever would argue or has argued that the character of Hamlet or Lear is "accurately depicted"—or not accurately depicted, for that matter? As for the assurance of Decon's toastmaster, Hillis Miller, that there's no one "single definitive interpretation" of a Shakespeare play, it's a straw argument—who thought there was? For how many years has it been legitimate for any tyro in criticism to point out that (after all) there's more than one legitimate reading to make of a Shakespeare play (or of a novel or a lyric poem)? We hear it from college freshmen every day. Who do Terence Hawkes and Hillis Miller think they're kidding?

Vickers deals with the New Historicists almost wholly through the work of Stephen Greenblatt, particularly Greenblatt's essay on the *Henriad*, "Invisible Bullets." At the conclusion of his long analysis of Greenblatt's anti-monarchial line about the plays, Vickers accuses him of

> a disregard for the integrity of the literary text; a bending of evidence, background and foreground, to suit one-sided interpretations; the foisting of modern cultural and political attitudes on to Renaissance texts.

Although Vickers spends a good deal of time charging that Greenblatt distorts the historical anecdote with which, as usual, he begins his essay, the more serious distortion, it appears to me, is Greenblatt's assertion that Shakespeare's Henry plays are concerned with "the production and containment of subversion and disorder." Everything follows from this: the reform of Hal; the rejection of Falstaff; the victory over the French at Agincourt—and we are invited to cast a cold eye on such "containment," with its analogies to twentieth-century instances of state supremacy and the throttling of dissident individual factions. Vickers' point-by-point critique of Greenblatt's account of Prince Hal picks out of it characterizing devaluations like "the prince and principle of falsification," "a counterfeit companion . . ." "an anti-Midas"; "everything he touches turns to dross"; a "counterfeit coin." This unsympathetic reading is arrived at only by neglecting 95 percent of the text, says Vickers. But forget the percentage figure; the point is, in my judgment, that Greenblatt reads Shakespeare without ever evincing, as far as one can see, any pleasure in the text (to allude dangerously to another French Liar). He is so busy making his "case" against Hal and authority that he reads right through the magnificient poetry, converting it ruthlessly to "meanings" in the service of an argument. This sort of behavior is of course not confined to Stephen Greenblatt but is seen generally in the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

writings of most of the critics Vickers considers in his book. I shall return to the question of just what to do with the fact that Shakespeare is—and not just among other things—a poet.

Time and again in arguing with the different critical schools, Vickers makes effective war on "abstractionism." This practice consists—in the case of the Shakespeare criticism of a highly-regarded philosopher, Stanley Cavell—of distorting the evident sense of a text in the direction of philosophical and psychoanalytical abstractions. An egregious example of this distortion is Cavell's (as always) tortuous dealings with *Othello*, where the philosopher claims that Cartesian skepticism is "in full existence" in Shakespeare's tragedies, then moves to the problem of how one can know the existence of another, then worries about what Othello did or didn't know about Desdemona's virginity when they married. Cavell's psychoanalytic attempt to provide Othello with a sexual trauma that determines his murder of Desdemona at the play's end, Vickers sees as distorting into abstractionism important overt meanings in the play—most notably Iago's elaborately successful plot to bring the catastrophe about. "Cavell's remarkable torturing of logic," Vickers argues, "pulls the play into a private nexus of interests, from philosophy to psychoanalysis, and finally to a spurious form of etymology." (At the end of the essay Cavell calls attention "to the hell and the demon staring out of the names of Othello and Desdemona.") "Competence," writes Vickers, "even distinction in philosophy is obviously no guarantee of sensitivity, tact, or inwardness with literary texts"; I would go further and say that distinction in philosophy is on the whole unlikely to go along with distinction in literary criticism, Mill or Santayana to the contrary.

Disregarding important elements of the play when they don't fit into the critical scheme you're attempting to impose on it, is what feminist critics also do with *Othello*—what Vickers calls "screening out Iago." Thus efforts by Carol Neely, and a number of others from whose work Vickers illustrates, see the play in terms of attitudes of opposition between the sexes. Neely judges the play's females to be quite superior to the males—the men are in the main "'murderous coxcombs'" (the words are Emilia's) while the women "are not murderous, and they are not foolishly idealistic or foolishly cynical as the men are." Vickers points out that only by screening out Iago in this way can Neely read the play in terms of gendered contrasts: "this whole superbly articulated claustrophilic, deeply painful plot-structure is ignored by the feminist critic, reduced to its simplest components—'the men and the women'—and rearranged into two piles."[2]

[2] Some of the most pious feminist critics are not, of course, female. Peter Erickson's *Rewriting Shakespeare, Rewriting Ourselves* (1991) has an admiring chapter on Adrienne Rich's treatment of the father-daughter situation as a "rewriting" of *King Lear* which shows us that because (in Erickson's words) Shakespeare "cannot give us Cordelia's point of view," therefore he "does not encompass everything, is not universal." And

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In his introductory paragraph to the chapter that takes up the Christians and the Marxists (I found this less lively than those preceding it), Vickers usefully sums up some of the ways of viewing Shakespearean characters he thinks are misconceived. All the schools except deconstruction—which reduces characters to "traces," "purely verbal effects"—accept the substantiality of characters within the play "but then force them into preconceived patterns":

> For the feminists it is essential that characters be seen as gendered, culturally superior or inferior, oppressor or oppressed. For the New Historicism the people in a play can be criticized for being in a dominant, exploitative relationship, or sympathised with as the victims of power, colonialism, or whatever. To the Freudians, they are individual case-studies, each manifesting one version or other of a limited, but endlessly recombinable repertoire of fantasies and neuroses. All these forms of criticism can be described as only partly literary, for they all ignore the primary experience of drama as a sequence of action which unfolds over time.

Your response to this formulation will be in line with your feelings about Vickers' book overall. If you think that the schools summed-up here are travestied beyond recognition, or if you think there's a narrowness in Vickers' conception of "literary" criticism, or if you think it naive to identify as "primary" any particular "experience of drama" and think the emphasis on sequential action is also naive, then you will dismiss *Appropriating Shakespeare*. By now my own bias should have become clear: that whatever particular errors or excesses are present in his arguments with particular critics and interpretations, Vickers is on to something very important, namely, the deflection of criticism (and not just in regard to Shakespeare) into abstracting and reductive "thematic" or ideological "readings."

Like Vickers, I judge these aggressive efforts to interpret Shakespeare to be insufficiently literary in that they don't tell us what it is like to read the plays. To illuminate that activity of reading, a critic would need, certainly, to consider the dramatic art as a sequence of action unfolding over time. But I would put the emphasis on something even prior to sequence, something I call, vaguely enough, Shakespeare's language—what has sometimes been referred to, though not so often any more, as the "poetry" of the plays. This poetry is frequently, it will be agreed, of an extraordinary beauty and the reason why Shakespeare is admired, fetishized even; it is a great mistake, even at this late date in Western culture, to pay little attention to it, or to ignore it altogether in the interests of something presum-

---

though most of Shakespeare's women aren't able to disrupt the patriarchal (or bad) social system of which they are part, Venus and Helena are able to challenge patriarchy— though, notes Erickson solemnly, "their assertiveness is by no means ideal in twentieth-century feminist terms." Poor Venus! Poor Shakespeare!

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ably larger and more culturally significant. Or to try and liberate Shakespeare's characters from its grip: one misconceived approval of that attempt must do to illustrate a larger tendency in modern criticism. Discussing *Othello*, Richard Wheeler says with respect to the female characters that "It has taken the energies of feminist criticism to dislodge [Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca] from the play's powerful rhetoric of both idealism and degradation."[3] In other words, criticism is praised for rescuing Shakespeare's characters from the richly disturbing poetry through which they are not just presented but created. A strange effort, surely.

Can it still be worthwhile to attempt something like a disinterested study of a Shakespearean drama, which would attempt to see the object as in itself it really is? Or, assuming that twentieth century fin de siècle readers find Arnold's insistence about criticism hopelessly dated and an invitation to self-delusion merely, can there be an "interested" criticism that above all is interested in exploring that play's language, its poetry, not merely in order to move through it to themes or categories that would somehow explain it? As one who presumes, on occasion, to "teach" this or that play to a group of undergraduates, such interested criticism seems both possible and exhilarating. Where would one go for examples of the activity in books and essays? I think of Mark Van Doren's still useful *Shakespeare* (1939) and D.J. Enright's little-known gem *Shakespeare and the Students* (1970). Although Derek Traversi's books are prolix and sometimes plodding, they do try to keep us in touch with actual sequences of Shakespeare's verse. More recently two English critics, John Bayley (in *Shakespeare and Tragedy*, 1981) and Barbara Everett (in *Young Hamlet*, 1989) show that there can be value in approaching the plays without a nameable "approach"—without becoming an appropriator who has paid his or her dues to a reigning school. (It seems difficult for American critics to operate independently of one or another of these schools, given the professionalized academy.) One of the ways of defending the practices of those writers criticized adversely by Brian Vickers in his book is to say that new approaches to Shakespeare were necessary because critics earlier in the century had more or less exhausted what there was to say about the language considered "in itself." This seems to me a shibboleth, and certainly not something that someone who claims to care about poetry should let pass. But you have to care enough about the poetry to want to see it for itself and not another thing (as Eliot used to say). With Shakespeare, there is still plenty more to see.

[3] The quotation from Wheeler I found in a challenging essay by Richard Levin, "Feminist Thematics and Shakespearean Tragedy" (*PMLA*, 1088a, pp. 125–138). See also the letter in response to this essay signed by twenty-four outraged feminist critics (also in *PMLA*) as well as Levin's letter in response to them. Levin's essays (see also "The Politics of Bardicide," *PMLA*, 1990, pp. 491–504) anticipate many of Vickers' arguments and should be looked up.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ROBERT SCHULTZ

Five Kinds of Desire

THE OBSESSIVE SUBJECT OF ELIZABETH SEYDEL MORGAN'S *The Governor of Desire*[1] is, as its title suggests, the experience and governance of sexual desire. The book is meticulously arranged, with the first and last poems both comparing desire to natural disaster. The opening poem, "Ungovernable," is a kind of heroic simile in which workers piling sandbags against a flood realize both the necessity and futility of their efforts. There is, in fact, a secret identification with the rising waters, and the workers know: "the day will come / we'll shake our heads and smile, / our lips shaping the word *survived* / like a kiss." The book's final poem, "Election," presents the impotence of a state's governor in the face of a disaster, and asks: "would we rejoice if governors were gone? / The regulation of our hearts all gone?" The answer, and the book's last word on the subject, is a helplessly divided one: "We will go on electing you, governors, / while we long for the earth / to shift under our feet. . . . / We crave disaster. We will need you forever."

In poems that elaborate the themes of love and lust, pleasure and loss, memory and regret, Morgan usually characterizes desire as something all-consuming and illicit. It arrives like summer weather and must be repented of and put aside in order to play one's public role. "Academic Year" presents a student or teacher organizing herself in September, willing away the startling image of "a woman, / lying naked on her back in the grass, / damp with sweat, with the double / moistures of love." But in "Puritans" and "Ghost Governor" the forces of surveillance and punishment seem, paradoxically, only to fuel unruly impulses. All of this suggests a central question: is desire, in Morgan's view, subversive and anarchic, or is it a profound form of bodily and emotional wisdom?

The answer, as we might expect, is that it is both. To read this book as a whole is to conclude that what seems like simple opposition turns out to be something more complicated. Through her vacillations, Morgan suggests that desire and its governance is a game in which, for the sake of greater interest, we play on both sides. This is true also of Morgan's poetics, in which even the most intense and explosive subject matter is sharpened when it encounters the resistance of

[1] THE GOVERNOR OF DESIRE, by *Elizabeth Seydel Morgan*. Louisiana State University Press. $15.95; $8.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

formal arrangement. She shapes her free verse lines artfully, with a sure ear for rhythm. The last four lines of "One Trouble with Forgiveness," if divided differently, would make a heroic couplet: "I deny the guilt, / the quickening, / that joy, that lust / when this boy stood in my doorway." And there are traditionally formal poems here—a villanelle, two pantoums, and some short poems in quatrains. "Laws of Nature," in two quatrains, is virtually Augustan:

> The moment hangs now,
> Snapped at the stem
> Not by her, not by him.
> They claim by weight it left the bough.
>
> It stops in air until they meet
> This Friday, then will fall
> Into their hands, their mouths; all
> Our laws, they'll sigh, are round and sweet.

Two of the collection's most memorable poems are the funny and pathetic "What Is the Most Elvis Ever Weighed?" and the lovely, intellectual "Solon and Sappho as Statues." In the latter, the speaker wishes she could conceive of the law-giver and the poet as a couple, but can only imagine them as statues with their marble hands frozen inches apart. They were once alive, but are mere stone now, and "the passion's gone out / of even the ancient arguments // between art and law, / between the head and the heart, between / a man and a woman." The poem dramatizes its moment of exhaustion and impasse beautifully, but the rest of Morgan's book begs to differ. In these poems, the old contraries still contend with full force, as desire and its governance secretly collaborate in the making of love, art, and culture.

Lola Haskins, in her book *Hunger*,[2] is at her best when she works with historical material in historical voices. Her book, in six sections, contains poems set in the eighteenth-century English countryside; in nineteenth-century American polite society; in the (often rural) American present; and (through exhibitions of paintings) in Mexico and London, 1969 to the present. Of these, the strongest are the poems set in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The poems of our own moment sometimes contain clichés ("white breasts of cloud," "something wild, flying away") or strained instances of the pathetic fallacy ("pale ears of corn" in a freezer "have forgotten how the wind used to dance / in their stalks"; "The air's dead weight" before an argument is like "grapes in pain / about to fall"). And the poems' syntactic development—the verbal motions which reveal the

[2] HUNGER, by *Lola Haskins*. University of Iowa Press. $9.95p.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

turns of imagination—often seem overly familiar. But, remarkably, these areas of defect become the cardinal strengths of the historical poems. When Haskins takes on the voices of historical speakers, image and conceit become more striking and original, while the syntax becomes more varied and inventive.

Haskins has found a trove of conceits in the details of nineteenth-century domestic routine: etiquette guides, embroidery patterns, flower arrangement, cooking, shopping, and fashion make concrete the lives of her speakers and provide metaphors for their desires and frustrations. Daughters taught to sew heraldic symbols come to understand as women "the places of their husbands and sons / among crimson threads knotted long ago / on the wrong side of the cloth." A young woman searches the mysteries of formal dinner etiquette for a language adequate to her passion. And a wife taking out wildflowers in needlework realizes "what she can, and cannot, own."

The sequence, "Xtofer and Elizabeth," presents a girl's coming of age and her eventual betrothal to, marriage with, and betrayal by her father's lawyer. Elizabeth is the daughter of a wealthy English farmer at the beginning of the eighteenth century, and an early poem presents her sensual awakening in terms of a cat's play:

> . . . The chance brush of
> petticoat along my unclothed leg
> must drive me wild, I think,
> as our puss went that found
> a small green herb, which he
> rubbed at and purred deeper
> in his throat than ever
> I heard him do before. Then
> he thought to bite its heart.
> And went leaping through the grounds.
> I can still conjure him, rolling
> on the grass, huge dragon wings
> ashiver in his mouth.

Syntax, diction, and detail are convincing here, making the simile of catnip and dragonfly fresh and accurate. In the same sequence, Elizabeth's recollection of grouse taking flight provides an image for the pregnancy she has begun to feel pressing at the waist of her gown. Referring to her lover, she says:

> . . . I watch
> your dear face in candlelight and consider
> the story I'll tell when the bedcurtains
> are drawn tonight.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I have seen the grass
moving in just such a slight way
before the grouse break free, whose wings
beat high and sound like rain.

The story of the ensuing marriage is a sad one. Several pregnancies end in stillbirths before a daughter lives, the husband begins to rove, and Elizabeth is left to whisper consolations to her sleeping three-year-old.

The historical poems richly present the experience of women, as the complexity of their material, emotional, and imaginative lives presses against the constraints of assigned roles. The men, as a rule, are distant and inscrutable, privileged creatures filled with appetites and duplicity. In the short sequence "Six Cairns for Mary," the husband is most vividly presented in terms of his breakfast plate:

Yellow smears upon a white ground.
Two greasy commas that remain of chops.
A knife thrust through the fork's tines.
And, over all, the scattered dots of crumbs
brushed from his hands as,
pig-shine on his lips, he turns to go.

This is a wonderfully evocative poem, but men seeking reflections of their own complexities will have to look elsewhere.

Timothy Russell's first full-length collection, *Adversaria*,[3] presents life in the shadow of the steel plant that looms over his Ohio town "larger than most cathedrals." Russell himself has worked at the plant for twenty years, most recently as a boiler repairman, and the poems render natural and industrial images with an acuity and restraint that seem almost Chinese. The book's most direct allusions, however, are to late-Imperial Roman poetry; each poem is titled in Latin and the dominant stance is a nuanced stoicism.

Recurrent images enforce the eerie power of the blast furnaces and smokestacks, and the seeming inevitability of their presence. Repeatedly, we are shown the "blue-orange flames / dancing instead of the moon / above the blast furnaces," the furnaces themselves with "huge pipes curving around them / like venae cavae, like aortae," and around the plant the stains of industry: rain that is not always rain, puddles of "orange water / reflecting an iron bridge." Beneath the plant, among the neighborhoods with their "houses snug as teeth," a flowering locust and a nesting oriole are seen for the miracles they

[3] ADVERSARIA, by *Timothy Russell*. Northwestern University Press/Triquarterly Books. $25.00; $10.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

are. And an intimate exchange between husband and wife at the breakfast table is a sustaining pastoral moment:

> I'm eating toast, and
> I crave strawberries.
>
> When I mention this,
> she lowers the straps
> of her orange nightgown,
> and smiles, wickedly.
> "In Bono Et Malo"

This is a place "where fresh asparagus is exotic, / and men tend machinery all night / as if it were troubled livestock." But it is not a place or a way of life that can be easily dismissed or condemned. Russell declares: "Had you wanted apples / the mill would not be here. / This would still be orchard."

We didn't want paradise, we wanted steel. Russell's poetry bears witness to the world our desire has created, but is not overtly moralistic or political. Morality, here, finally boils down to a question of morale, the ability to follow one day with another. And politics is seen as intractable posturing: "two peonies, / one white, one red, / bloom like political arguments, / each its own perfect example" ("In Absurdo"). Russell has written an elemental poetry, in which the mill is accepted as a kind of given with an inevitability almost natural. There is fatigue here, along with fear and resignation, and an air of fatality shadows the book's remarkable poise. But there is also beauty and wonder, and a dash of hard-bitten bravado:

> . . . Sometimes,
> I think I'd rather live
> in some more temperate zone,
> amid less brutal scenery,
> where people are familiar
> with public fountains, say,
> or jazz at noon saturating
> the plaza, small round leaves
> quivering in the ornamental trees,
> but I know this is weakness.
> It is this life that makes
> any other life possible.
> "In Aegri Somnia"

This life, and the whole industrial scheme of which it is a part, finds its epitome in an ailanthus growing on a steel slab, surrounded by junk. "It was vital and doomed," Russell writes, "and still / an ordinary

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tree of heaven" ("In Medias Res"). The life that Russell portrays, hard as it is, is a whole life, awful and lovely.

In *Getting Under Way: New and Selected Poems* [4] by Colette Inez, there is a book within the book. Inez's poetry is cosmopolitan in its interests and various in its modes, but it returns repeatedly to a central story which is at once personal and archetypal. It is the story of Inez's own parentage, childhood, and growth into maturity, and it is the story of the making and sustaining of a coherent self in spite of destructive circumstances.

Inez is the daughter of an archival scholar and a Catholic priest. At birth, she was placed in a Brussels orphanage where she remained for eight years. Just before the outbreak of World War II, she was sent to a foster family in the United States. In this country, her first foster mother died of alcoholism and her second was abusive. The sheer narrative is compellingly presented in poems scattered throughout the career. The earliest of these tend to be complaints or protests, as in "A Collar Round My Thoughts," which begins: "Priest, my father, priest, / your collar cuts my neck. . . ." Ten years later, in her third book, she is able to write poems which confront the parents she did not know, seeking to wring from them, if only in her own imagination, a necessary acknowledgment. In "Along the Garonne," she writes:

> In my mother's room ghosts sighed:
> "Who are you to make claims?"
> "Lovechild," I answer in a river town
> of cypress and palm,
> floodmarks on the house
> from an old spring torrent.

The breakthrough volume in this narrative is *Family Life* (1988), in which Inez turns her gaze most directly upon her childhood, her parents, and her foster parents. And it is in this volume that she achieves an impressive poise, fashioned out of understanding, pity, and forgiveness for her biological and foster parents, all of whom she has surpassed in maturity and self-possession.

A turning point is revealed in the poem "The Dream Forest," in which the young girl decides to become "rich in words." She is newly arrived in the United States and does not understand the English spoken around her by disapproving foster grandparents, so she resorts to her imagination and commits herself to a mastery of her new language. And so it is by means of poetry that she is, in *Family Life*, able to imagine and forgive her unknown parents. Reflecting

[4] GETTING UNDER WAY: New and Selected Poems, by *Colette Inez*. Story Line Press. $26.95; $18.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

upon her poetic vocation in a more recent poem ("The Entry of James Ensor into My Memories of Brussels"), she writes:

> . . . the child I was asks: what am I to learn in the subtle world? And I answer her, to draw consoling words out of the air. To arrange them like irises in a vase, to weave them into proof our lives like a sea teem with remembrances. To endure. . . .

The 37 new poems included in the selected poems indeed teem with remembrances, as Inez continues to recover her past and to reconcile herself more fully to it. Some of the poems continue strands of significant imagery. One, "Santa Cruz Idyll," imagines her parents together, with herself watching, "stirring my image at the edge of a pond." Later in the same poem: "Now I stand near the water that touched their bodies when they swam." From the "spring torrent" that marked her mother's imagined house, to the river that touches her parents' bodies as they swim in her vision of them, water has signified the illicit passion of her conception. It is also the reflective element in which she has tried, with difficulty, to perceive herself. In the mirror-less orphanage she tried at dinner to glimpse herself in the liquid in her bowl, and she and a friend "squatted by a puddle and wrote our names / on water with a stick . . ." Though the names vanished, "The reflected sky trembled with our signatures" ("Escape from the Iron Gates"). In many poems throughout the career, mirrors and water recur in an ongoing meditation upon names, writing, and identity.

It is one of the signal achievements of Inez's career that it traces the progress of a poet from choked protest to full-throated assurance. Over time, the poet has presented herself as one whose "resonating breath" was cut off by her priest-father's collar, then as a girl writing her name in water, and finally as "a visible woman, full of inventions." This is a triumphant progress beautifully rendered, and the present collection, in which we can trace it, is very welcome. But I think there is room for yet another book. This second selected poems would deliberately gather and arrange only the autobiographical poems, including some not found in the present volume, into the poetic *Bildungsroman* which stands at the center of this splendid career.

Scattered through *The Palms*,[5] by Charlie Smith, are poems which depict a lurid family romance in which almost nothing is repressed, in which almost everything is acted out to its disturbing conclusion. But these poems of husband and wife, father and son, mother and son, brother and brother—while they provide foundational examples of

[5] THE PALMS, by *Charlie Smith*. W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. $8.95p.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the disorder and violence which pervade the book—are not, I think, the book's most interesting achievement. Instead, I'm enthralled by two other things that Smith has been able to do here. Aside from the poems of family romance, he has written others which dramatize what it feels like at this moment in the United States to *expect* violence, to feel it in the air, impending and inevitable. And, second, he has perceived and rendered the world as a great storehouse of figures, without diminishing the world's natural or human immediacy. The two accomplishments are related.

In the book's title poem, the speaker drives through L.A. in a rented car as the sun sets gorgeously over a neighborhood of "crunched little stores / with their brocades of steel locking them up." A cluster of "bunched-up shacks" stands beneath a ridge dotted by "widely spaced, disconnected-looking houses." On the ridge a line of palms stands in silhouette. There is no breeze, and as the tops of the palms hang still, they evoke in the speaker a surprising association:

> . . . they seemed, black against the huge sky
> of Los Angeles, like small dark thoughts tethered
> at the end of reason's thick ropes, hanging there in gratuitous
> solitude,
> like the thoughts of a man behind a cluttered restaurant counter,
> who speaks no English, wearing a hat made of butcher paper,
> who slaps his small daughter, until they both are stunned,
> stupid and helpless, overwhelmed by their lives.

In this complex figure, the palm-tops hover like small explosions of unreason over the city—the thoughts perhaps of a brutalized and brutal father, whose presence has been conjured by the likeness of a palm's crown to a paper chef's hat. The very unlikeliness of the association dramatizes the pressure of a looming violence which, in L.A. and in the culture generally, is never far from our minds. This is an almost metaphysical poetry, with figures that seem initially discordant but which, upon reflection, are just. Moreover, if these images are yoked by violence together, it is not the violence of an ingenious wit but of a deep psychological urging brought candidly and skillfully to light.

"Why . . . does my mind veer to violence . . . ?" asks the speaker of another poem. But if the figures which arise most obsessively in this poetry are violent ones, the figurative imagination itself is also the means by which the poems' speakers find moments of solace. In "Figurative Marriage," the world is an "arrangement of miseries and misfires that go on / snapping off the ends of things like a machine left / running," but it is also a place where violets will soon "pop their latches." Confronting a world this mixed, this jagged, the speaker finds the carriage of others especially significant and poignant. He watches fishermen at sunset,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

their eloquent movements an abstract or diagram

of movement, of the cast-forth and draw-back that is a figure
we all recognize. Watching them I think how often I learn
something about myself in the smallest motion of a stranger. . . .

The poem ends with a woman at a lunch counter buttering toast, "touching the knife to the grain of the bread, raising the knife / to lick avidly the fat greasy gold of butter, until it is clean."

Observed moments of pleasure or grace buoy the speakers of several poems. In "The Day Race," a couple attends a stock car race where "the cars, / fierce-faced like shamans, / appear at the turn four abreast. . . ." The speaker, a man in the crowd with the woman he loves, holds himself apart, at the edge of things, watching. He is less moved by the race, itself, than by the way the others "give their whole hearts / to it, almost helplessly / like children eating stolen pies." He recognizes how the noise of the race, the pursuit, and the likelihood of sudden violence involve the spectators in a compressed pageant of their lives. Linked through the spectacle to unlikely companions, the speaker reflects: "[W]e do better among others, / are in this way not so strange to ourselves. . . ." And then he is caught up in the race, himself, able for once to join in:

. . . Now we rise to our feet screaming,
alive, as we always were, at the heart of the world.

In this book, the world often moves "like a brutish uncle, drunk, through the house," but the poetry doesn't. Combining narrative power and lyric grace, Smith confronts a patently violent world with a tough, but finely nuanced imagination. And, in the end, readers may take away chiefly a sweetness and delicacy, as speaker after speaker enacts a "figurative marriage" with observed strangers who show him a way to go on.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

R. S. GWYNN

Labors of Love

EVER SINCE WHITMAN ESTABLISHED THE MODERN PARADIGM of poet as ardent loafer, subsequent practitioners of the craft have fallen into two camps—on the one hand, those who give the impression of having written their poems in odd moments between splitting logs or mixing vats of toxic waste and, on the other, poets who would rather split infinitives or mix metaphors than get their hands dirty. Both the proletarian ants and the leisure-class grasshoppers have had their champions. "I who have always hated work" was Yeats's self-characterization. "Why should I let the toad *work* / Squat on my life?" groaned Larkin. Comes now Donald Hall, who prefaces *Life Work*[1] with five epigraphs on the subject, two of them biblical, and follows these with an opening sentence that seems to establish his own partisanship pretty conclusively: "I've never worked a day in my life." Never mind that the claim proves to be an immense whopper and that Hall turns out to be only a loafer-poet wannabe; his method is to proceed by contraries in this engaging autumnal meditation on the subjects of work and lethargy, health and sickness, love and loss.

Much of *Life Work* is given over to sorting out the fine distinctions of labor: "There are jobs, there are chores, and there is work." Chores are mindless tedium, jobs pay the bills, but work, the *real* work, is done less out of necessity than sheer joy. Perhaps much of the difference here has to do with time and one's perception of it. With chores, the minutes drag along like Pope's wounded snake; with jobs, eight hours equal a day's wages equal a new suit or a payment on the Dodge. But with work, time ultimately becomes irrelevant. Instead of too much or too little of it, in the happiest intellection it almost ceases to matter at all. Hall has to resort to a neologism to get at the heart of the matter: "In the best part of the best day, *absorbedness* occupies me from footsole to skulltop. Hours or minutes or days—who cares?—lapse without signifying." In one droll passage, he describes how, in a period when the work is going so well that he has to restrain himself from overdoing it, he wakes at three and literally forces himself to stay in bed until 4:30 A.M., "waking to check the clock every twenty-seven minutes" before charging out of the gate. Mr. Franklin would have doubtless nodded approval.

Our attitudes toward work have changed over the centuries. The

[1] LIFE WORK, by *Donald Hall.* Beacon Press. $15.00.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

first modern men—Franklin, say, or Voltaire—saw it as an end in itself that ultimately led, whatever its worldly benefits, to spiritual well-being. Whether cultivating one's own garden or single-handedly managing the affairs of Philadelphia, they give the impression that idleness is the enemy of everything that is good in human nature. Franklin, to be sure, did not discount the tangible rewards of hard work, but one is always struck in reading him by how money seems only an attractive bonus dolloped on top of days full of measurable accomplishment. The next century moved from realistic depictions of work like Wordsworth's accounts of leech-gatherers and shepherds to a more rose-colored view in the Victorian era. Agricultural labor, in particular, became increasingly romanticized as the population moved from the farmlands to the cities. It should come as no surprise that "The Man with the Hoe" was reprinted in countless small-town newspapers or that *The Gleaners* or *The Song of the Lark* hung in a million genteel parlors; these icons were tangible reminders to members of the middle class of a way of life irremediably lost, or perhaps escaped from, even if it was only a few years or miles behind them. One result of this sentimentalization of labor was the intellectual's embrace of the Worker (always capitalized and usually kept at arm's length) during the thirties. A thousand WPA post office murals attest to this, as do such odd relics as Sandburg's celebrations of the rites of spring being performed around a brand-new John Deere tractor.

Hall recognizes this sort of thing, no matter what its source, for the bushwa it generally is. He worked beside his grandfather as a teenager and knows that there is precious little glamour in the small farmer's hardscrabble existence: "This life was not de Crèvecoeur's paradise. The farm produced little money, and my grandfather wore my father's old hand-me-downs; everywhere rags of poverty flourished like skunkweed. Still, my grandparents appeared to enjoy their work, which did not extend human consciousness but occupied or absorbed it." From a different quarter come the lofty pronouncements about the Dignity of Labor. The poet is not amused. "When I hear talk about 'the work ethic,' " he says, "I puke. CEOs talk about it, whose annual salaries average one hundred and thirty times their workers' wages. Whatever the phrase purports to describe, it is not an ethic; it is not an idea of work's value or a moral dictate but a feeling or tone connected to work, and it is temperamental and cultural. . . . I no more have a work ethic than I have self-discipline. I have so many pages a day, so many books and essays." The alternative to plugging away is the nowhere-land of depression, in which indolence feasts and fattens upon itself. Hall recalls an earlier version of himself "lying alone in a bed smoking cigarettes, reading the cracks in the ceiling; for two years of middle life, my private life was a mess and I wrote no poems; depression rolled like the waves of mid ocean day after day after day." His solution, in the throes of mid-life, was to *quit* working

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in order to do his work, giving up tenure, benefits, and security to return to the family farm with his second wife, Jane Kenyon. In effect, Hall's free-lance writing has become the equivalent of the subsistence farming of his forebears; like theirs, his is essentially a two-person operation; in separate rooms the work of husband and wife goes on in separate yet parallel courses, just as his grandfather Wesley's dominion of the farm ended whenever he set foot inside his wife Kate's kitchen.

As I have indicated, Hall's ruminations over his own brand of work are interwoven with other stories. He details his grandparents' farming, and contrasts that with his parents' middle-class lifestyle. His father's case is a sad one. A man who wanted only to teach school and coach, he found himself tied to a desk, totalling columns of figures for his own father's dairy business, living primarily for weekends and golf. He died of cancer at fifty-two, and now his son, not that much older, faces the same demon. Hall has been battling cancer for the last five years. The second half of the book details a recurrence of the disease in the spring of 1992, this time resulting in the removal of half of his liver. It is typical of Hall's straight-ahead attitude, work ethic or self-discipline or no, that once he has assured his wife that he will survive, his main complaint is that surgery and recovery are distractions that keep him from work. Or, put another way, work is the distraction that keeps him from its grim alternative: "If work is no antidote to death, nor a denial of it, death is a powerful stimulus to work. *Get done what you can.*" The word play in the title of *Life Work* should be obvious; we work to live and live to work. Working his way back from surgery, Hall completes the book that is partly the record of illness and partly the process of recovering from it. But completing one task only marks the beginnings of others, even if the new ones will perforce take different form. "I will undertake no more long projects," vows the poet. "Today if I begin a thought about 1995 I do not finish the thought. It is easier, and it remains pleasant to undertake short endeavors which absorb me as much as any work can. There is only one long-term project." Whatever work is, Hall seems to say, it was not Adam's curse but his salvation.

During the three months when he was writing *Life Work*, Hall was also putting the finishing touches on a new collection of poetry, his thirteenth by my count. *The Museum of Clear Ideas*[2] appeared in the spring of 1993. In recent years Hall has published a prize-winning collection, *The One Day*, and a selected volume, and these have verified his hard-earned arrival at the status of major poet. He began very young, going to Bread Loaf as a teenager, and knew the great ones (*Their Ancient Glimmering Eyes* is his vastly entertaining memoir of his encounters with Frost, Pound, Moore, and others). But, while he garnered the fellowships and even won a Newdigate at Oxford, his

[2] THE MUSEUM OF CLEAR IDEAS, by *Donald Hall*. Ticknor & Fields. $18.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

early work seemed derivative of his mentors, Winters especially, and the poetry from his middle years was often downright bad, as he fell under the Blight of Bly and the deep image fashions of the late sixties and early seventies. It was not until he was close to fifty that he hit his stride, and his poetry has grown progressively stronger in the years since. *The One Day* contains sections of pure jeremiad that are both funny and frightening, and the new part of *Old and New Poems* includes several straightforward personal narratives of considerable power. It is not likely that a poet in his mid sixties is going to surpass his earlier achievement, but old Donald Hall continues to give his younger self a run for the money.

The Museum of Clear Ideas is a longish book (120 pages) divided into four unequal sections, with the last being a reprise of the second. Throughout, Hall adapts various formal strategies (loose Alcaics and Sapphics are two), masks, and Borges-like conceits. The first part, a single long poem called "Another Elegy," concerns the life and untimely death of one William Trout, poet and substance abuser of equally large proportions who is yet another member, albeit somewhat belated, of the generation whose best minds were destroyed by madness. Trout (Is he the brother of Kilgore?) has rags and tags of several famous biographies stuck to him—Lowell, Wright, Logan—but in many ways he is Hall's own dark side, a nightmare version of himself who, instead of prevailing over the slump of his forties, "drank two Guggenheims and snorted / an NEA." But Trout, too, has his bright moments. Like Hall he is an early riser and proves himself a devotee of more than one kind of dew:

> Bill Trout
> woke up, the best mornings of his life—without debilities
> of hangover, without pills or panic—to practice joy
> at four o'clock dawn: to test words, to break them down
> and build again, patient to construct immovable objects
> of art by the pains of intelligent attention—remaining
> alert or awake to nightmare.

Trout finds a measure of personal happiness in a third marriage to a Bengali dancer, and after his death, according to Hall's note from the spurious *Norton Anthology of Contemporary Verse*, wins the Pulitzer and is the subject of three collections of essays. It seems a mordant irony that Hall opens his book with a poem about a poet whose fame was posthumous.

The second section, "Baseball," consists of nine nine-stanza poems, with each stanza containing nine nine-syllable lines. This is a tour de force of considerable dash, and it is extended in the book's final section, which consists of three "Extra Innings," in which the numbers are increased to ten, eleven, and twelve, respectively. The persona here is K.C., a character so Hall-like that at a softball game in a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

schoolyard the mask, in this case an umpire's, slips a bit: "Once when I / intoned 'Strike one!' a small batter said, / 'Hey, that's your "Casey at the Bat" voice, Mr. Hall.' (I dislike it, having // a poetry voice—but I have one.)" The man who writes "out these tentative verses / —K.C. at the Desk, Mudville at bat, / last of the ninth" is like Hall in another respect: much of the poem is a tonal carry-over from the satiric sections of *The One Day*. Here is K.C. in a fine frenzy on one of Hall's favorite McSubjects:

> 5. By twenty twenty-eight, when K.C.
> Turned one hundred, eighty-three percent
> of American undergraduates
> majored in creative writing, more
> folks had MFAs than VCRs,
> and poetry had passed acrylic
> in the GNP. The NEA
> offered fellowships for destroying
> manuscript and agreeing "*never*
>
> 6. to publish anything jagged on
> the right side of the page, or *ever*
> described as 'prose poems.' " Guerrillas
> armed with WordPerfect holed in abstract
> redoubts. Chief of Staff Vendler mustered
> security forces, a k a
> death squads, and issued cheerful reports
> nightly on lyric television.

The poem is addressed to Kurt Schwitters, a Dada collagist who died in 1948 and who, according to Hall, "built his own living places into sculptural assemblages, each called *Merzbau*." The dedication is appropriate, for the poem itself becomes K.C./Hall's own *Merzbau*, its stanzas "assemblages of ordinary / things—cigarette wrappers, bus tickets, / ads—first to make collage, and then to / inhabit."

The title and longest section is a free fantasia on Horace's odes, spoken this time around by Horace Horsecollar, a bit player in early Disney cartoons. Horace's originals serve as points of departure for a sequence of autobiographical lyrics, most of them dealing harshly with a past lover, Fidelia, and gently with a present one, Camilla. Here is Milton's translation of the opening stanzas of 1:5 ("*Quis multa gracilis*"):

> What slender youth, bedew'd with liquid odours,
> Courts thee on roses in some pleasant cave,
> Pyrrha? For whom bind'st thou
> In wreaths thy golden hair,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Plain in thy neatness? O how oft shall he
On faith and changed gods complain, and seas
Rough with black winds, and storms
Unwonted shall admire!

The Horsecollar variation runs this way:

Who's this fellow wearing the aftershave lotion
with the slim figure embracing you, Fidelia,
in the rose garden beside
the artificial hill?

I suppose that he's nameless and legion, for whom
you loosen your golden abundant sensuous
hair. For the rest of his life
he'll weep over this hour. . . .

The subjects of the poems wander far afield from this triangle and ultimately consider language itself, how everything is swept "from the Museum of Clear Ideas / into twenty-foot waves of Atlantic rubbish." Here he impales the contemporary propensity, which Hall labels "the Tongue of High Coy," for saying *everything* euphemistically:

Do you desire to purchase a beverage?
We thank you for not smoking. Have a nice day.
May we share these suggestions with you? Let us
praise exaltation,

never calling a route salesman a milkman,
nor an officer of the law a cop, nor
a senior citizen old, nor a starving
freezing bagwoman

poor. When we can't alter ills that upset us
we will change their names to prevent compassion
from disturbing our ungulate composure:
words to deny worlds.

Of course, one of the oldest and noblest claims of language, especially in the poet's hands, is to immortality itself:

Crooked or straight, poets mortgage their prospects
for an improbable goal: to make objects
carved in the abiding stone of language;
to leave, when they die, durable relics.

Ars longa, vita brevis. When Hall returns to his baseball trope in the three poems that close the book, the extra innings have become a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

metaphor for the years the poet, now referring to himself as one of "the posthumous," has thus far stolen from the Great Statistician:

> Now in the mild risen sun
> we take deliberate pleasure breathing air;
>
> 4. every hour of our lives we inhale deeply
> to reassure ourselves that lungs still expand
> and contract. In the day we smell horsemanure
> or lilac, we feel sun or hail equally,
> with indifferent skin so long as synapses
> fire. If a worm nibbles at the underside
> of tissue, never mind: It is zero to
> zero, the eleventh inning of a blue
> April day. The posthumous never complain.

Those who saw Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon so vigorously going about the business of making and reading their poems in a recent Bill Moyers special will find the valedictory tone that suffuses these two books especially poignant. Personally, I find it hard to imagine an American poetry without Donald Hall. The first book of contemporary poetry I bought was a little Penguin anthology he edited over thirty years ago, and I have continually come back to his writing for guidance of a kind I can find nowhere else. I will not lie and say that he is my favorite poet, but I cannot think of anyone from whom I have learned more about what it means to *be* a poet. I suspect that I am not alone in these feelings. In *Life Work*, Hall frames the lovely paradox of the poet's vocation: "because I loved my work it was as if I did not work at all." This could serve as epitaph to a life well spent. *Ecce homo*. Who in our time has served the art more faithfully than Donald Hall?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

JOHN HAINES

Somewhat Less Than Holy

THE APPEARANCE OF THIS BOOK,[1] a loosely organized collection of autobiographical essays by Philip Levine, marks one more contribution to the history of American poetry in the past three or four decades. Though uneven in its writing, often distracting in its self-focus, it is on the whole an absorbing and valuable book, at its best honest and revealing of character. Whether it is, as the publishers claim, "essential reading," will depend on your view of poetry at this time.

Levine's has been a distinctive voice in our poetry. Unlike many present-day poets, he has never lacked for a theme—mainly his personal growth as a poet from his Detroit working-class background. It is a theme that, with its repeatedly emphasized identification with the poor and dispossessed of the world, he has made effective use of in his poems, even when at times he appears to have converted it into a pose.

Briefly described, the essays take the reader by a circular route from Levine's apprenticeship as a student of writing at Iowa in the 1950s, back through his years of schooling and wage-earning in his by now mythical Detroit, and bringing him more or less up to date as a professor of writing at Fresno State University. Along the way he traces his early adherence to the principles of anarchy, and which he later connects with a period of residence in Francoist Spain. Through it all we are afforded detailed studies of his teachers and mentors like John Berryman, Robert Lowell, and Yvor Winters, together with impressions of his family and friends, with passing glimpses of individuals whom for one reason or another he rejected or despised. The style is discontinuous and episodic, at moments breathless and boyish, at other times considered and eloquent.

The opening essay describes Levine's early years at Iowa where he had the good fortune to find as classmates such young and promising people as Donald Justice, W. D. Snodgrass, Jane Cooper, and Henri Coulette. The classroom scenes in which Berryman and Lowell figure so prominently are in themselves excellent, and convey a strong sense of the excitement and companionship present at the time. One must envy Levine that rare convergence. It was a heady atmosphere, and he renders it with passion and loyalty.

At the same time, we see here the signs of something less agreeable:

[1] THE BREAD OF TIME: Toward an Autobiography, by *Philip Levine*. Alfred A. Knopf. $23.00.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a premonition of the poet as celebrity, and a portent of more dubious things to come. At the outset, Levine is reminded of the ordeal and circumstances from which poets in the past have made their art. And he goes on to question what he calls here "the amazing growth-industry" that poetry and creative writing have become: "Today anyone can be a poet; all he or she need do is to travel to the nearest college and enroll . . ." To his credit, Levine expresses skepticism regarding this development. What may have been fresh and exemplary with Levine and his classmates, has become unreflected habit in many subsequent candidates.

In Levine's account of class sessions under the guidance of his various intructors, something additional makes its appearance: a reliance on the judgement of a poet-teacher, someone who may, often enough, be less than a master of the craft, and with the added consequence, all too common now, of a preferential system among graduates.

Contrast this, if you will, with the lonely apprenticeship of an Eliot during his difficult early years in London; with the solitude of a Stevens on his long, meditative walks while the poet in him was slowly maturing, and you have a useful measure of a certain decline, of the absorption of independent creative effort into an institutional system. Anyone entering our time from an earlier epoch might view this academic growth with a certain wonder and mistrust. Was it really necessary? Did the art of poetry in an age of mass-media, confirming Wordsworth's intuition of 1800, really need to become, not a hobby but an industry?

For a satisfactory answer we must look to society at large, to the growth of a corporate mentality that would overturn every human value, converting the whole into a bureaucratic instrument of absolute control. With all due appreciation for the many advantages—the companionship and, ideally, the creation of a congenial atmosphere among students and instructors—I do not think you can separate the growth of "creative writing" from the larger social problem.

Throughout this book there occur passages that illustrate both the virtues and shortcomings of Levine's prose, as well as the working of self-mythology. Early in his story, on page 44, we find this:

> That autumn I found poetry. After dark, ambling the deserted streets, I would speak out to the moon and stars about the emotional revolution that was raging within me . . . I sang out to the city and the larger world beyond . . .

I must admit that this bit of self-conscious romanticism aroused in me a certain skepticism. Then, much later in his life, following a strenuous class session at Amherst, comes this quiet and lovely passage:

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> Somewhere bells sound the noon hour. The students file out in silence and, once released from this odd encounter, resume their usual lives. Now their good-natured chatter echoes down the halls . . .

Nothing could be more natural than the cadence of these simple sentences.

Elsewhere, in an otherwise scathing description of a wealthy family for whom he worked as a tutor, Levine recalls a scene of domestic quiet in which all antagonisms have for the moment abated:

> Outside the window behind Mr. Chase the late light is dwindling or perhaps an early darkness is falling from the air. I hear the door to the back porch open and close. The black cook and Gwen are no doubt beginning their trek to Livernois Avenue and the long wait for the evening bus. Their muffled voices fade.

In his exploration of a suitable background for his personal history, Levine repeatedly identifies his heroes: the writers and individuals he has at one time or another admired or compared himself with, whether they are the Lorca of *The Poet in New York*, the Mexican painter Diego Rivera, or the anarchist Francisco Ascaso. A problem with this emerges early in the essay titled "Holy Cities," in which Levine combines his own Detroit with the Byzantium of Yeats and the Barcelona of the Spanish Civil War. In doing this he deliberately places himself in compelling company. But Yeats's self-dramatization had the full weight of Irish history behind it—a matter of inheritance, an identification born of events and intensified by his participation in those events. This cannot be said to be the case with Levine, and the difference illustrates one prominent failing in contemporary American writing: the absence of a meaningful dialogue between the poets and their nation. The poet, typically, is left with an isolated self, to be exploited in a space dominated by mirrors and echoes.

It can be said, too, in reference to the Spanish Civil War, that the Barcelona of George Orwell, so memorably evoked in *Homage to Catalonia*, of the Spanish poets and anarchists whom Levine so ardently admires, was not merely a literary convenience, but a true place in which they fought, wrote and, often enough, died. Levine's situation is of another kind entirely. In a poem of his own quoted here, "Francisco, I'll Bring You Red Carnations," he adopts the fallen Spaniards of his choice:

> Here in the great cemetery
> behind the fortress of Barcelona
> I have come once more to see
> the graves of my fallen.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It is a strategy that in this case, and despite an initial and lingering sense of a false note, can be said to work.

In Levine's defense, it can be argued that this self-conscious association, exaggerated as in his case it can be, is no more than we might expect of an ambitious American poet who, in a fundamentally indifferent society, must seek to identify and claim a place for himself, however he is led to do this. It can be said that Whitman did no less, though he spoke from another age, a more hopeful and innocent time, when it was still possible to believe in the human potential of American democracy; when many people read and referred to poetry as a matter of ordinary social discourse, and when one could speak not only as a poet and private citizen, but on occasion in that finally necessary public voice, a voice still possible for Auden in his time, and which continues to be on occasion for a writer like Wendell Berry in our own.

There are a number of memorable episodes in this book, and among them I would mention the prolonged search by Levine and his wife for the anarchist graves in the Barcelona cemetery. Both as gesture and as narrative I found this exceptional.

For me, many of the best parts of the book remain the glimpses of people, the individuals encountered throughout the poet's life, in Detroit and California, in Spain and elsewhere. And not always nor necessarily the *names*—celebrities like Lowell, Berryman, and Yvor Winters, as important as these may have been to his development. But also the ordinary people and the less well known: two members of the Spanish Civil Guard whom he meets in a bar on a wet day on the Spanish coast; Sr. Rusiñol, his Barcelona Spanish tutor; the translator Hardie St. Martin; family members like Aunt Trish and Uncle Clem, and the numerous individuals in transit like Florence Hickok and Eugene Watkins, whom he calls on from his youth and later years.

Perhaps because they recalled for me my own reading in Spanish poetry, I found some of the finer pages in a lengthy essay centered on the poet Antonio Machado and the countryside from which so many of his poems emerged. Levine's affectionate regard for this man and poet transcends the bothersome self-attention otherwise so evident in this book. At the end of the essay, while recalling the Spanish countryside and imagining Machado on one of his evening walks, he says this:

> The world comes to him whether he is on the cold roads of Soria or in a mountain town of Andalusia. A river comes into view curved like a crossbow, the boughs of the plane trees bend to the weight of bees, the wind stirs in the long grasses at the edges of sight where a few travelers appear over the green mounds of the distant hills. The air deepens and stills in the fields; time stops.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Toward the end of the book, and in an entirely different vein, Levine quotes from a conversation with a friend named Jonathan this stunning description of a butterfly:

> "Consider this creature, it has a brain smaller than the head of a pin, yet it can walk, swim, fly, it can hunt, sleep on the wing, shit in various colors, change its own shape from grotesque and stumbling to dazzling and soaring. It can rebirth itself. It is millions of years older than we and has not changed in all that time because it is already far closer to perfection than we'll ever be, and it is beautiful to behold."

Finally we have the poignant story of a young woman named Dorothy who began early as a gifted poet, and then disappeared from the writer's life and from poetry itself, to be recalled at an affectionate and inquiring distance.

It is for such things that I am most likely to return to this book; for these, and for the look it gives us into the problem, never entirely resolved, of the poet in our time and place. Whether honored or not, we are here, every one of us devoted to the written and spoken word, and we need all the help we can get.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

DEAN FLOWER

Impersonations

JOHN UPDIKE HAS PUT ON UNLIKELY PERSONAE before—black African potentate (*The Coup*, 1978), counter-cultural mom (*S.*, 1988), Jewish novelist with writer's block (*Bech: A Book*, 1970), New England witch (*The Witches of Eastwick*, 1984)—so he can hardly be accused of timid impersonations. But his latest novel is a stretch even for him.[1] Its principal figure is Tristão, nineteen years old and black, a product of Rio de Janeiro's slums and squalor but touched up with a bit of "Black Orpheus" idealism. Quick as he is with a razor or a theft, Tristão is even quicker to declare undying love for (and have sex with) eighteen-year-old Isabel, whom he meets on the Copacabana beach. She is of course beautiful, rich, bored, and angelically white. Updike pretends to tell his story through both their points of view, but he cannot really surrender his own. When someone giggles, Tristão "felt a slight squirm of disgust at the complicitous, surrendering sound." When Isabel spends her first night away from home in Tristão's grungy *favela*, she is "struck by the fluidity of this hazy space" and sees the uneven floor as "pale profiles of swells and depressions such as dawn light etches on a far mountain range." These are obviously Updike's elegant perceptions, masquerading as those of his protagonists.

In transparent attempts to bolster the realism of his story Updike spatters it with authentic references, in Portuguese: "the orange-yellow of a *maracujá*," he will say, or "dyed as if with the juice of *genipapo* berries." The effect is again artificial, touristy. No matter how desperate the occasion, it will be interrupted for tidbits of information, notes on the architecture of Brasília, say, or the history of São Paolo. When Isabel and Tristão are starving in the jungle, we stop for a botany lesson—a field guide to the five types of palm (none edible) in the Amazonian basin. If the characters eat something, we are always given the recipe, no matter how tense the moment may be: "*caruru*, hot with grated *malagueta* peppers mixed with okra paste and *dendê* oil, topped by fried pieces of *garoupa*." There must be at least twenty such recipes scattered through the book. You have to wonder whether a novelist as skilled and self-conscious as Updike has really committed, without knowing it, such ludicrous effects as these.

An answer to this question lies in the nature of the story itself: it is a reprise of Updike's old favorite, the Tristan and Isolde fable—as

[1] BRAZIL, by *John Updike*. Alfred A. Knopf. $23.00.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

identified and criticized by Denis de Rougemont's *Love in the Western World* (whose thesis Updike welcomed and began consciously exploiting in 1965): the lovers feed on discontent and frustration, on unhappiness rather than fulfillment, ennobling their passion by starving it. *Brazil* is Updike's *reductio ad absurdum* of that story. "This dolly, I think she was made for me," says Tristão, who sees Isabel as a way out of the slums. Isabel in turn thinks that sex with Tristão is her Declaration of Independence, her reason to flee from a dull future determined by her father (a diplomat) and her guardian uncle (a sybarite). They escape Rio together, get caught and separated, then reunite to begin a series of degrading adventures which involve poverty, sexual humiliations, murders, desperate journeys. They cling absurdly to the idea of their love, in which sex is the main ingredient, and get punished for it. Updike has never been more icily detached from his characters than this. Tristan and Isolde have become Candide and Cunégonde, but they are less attractive than Voltaire's innocents. The ugliness of Tristão's engorged penis, his "yam," is emphasized repeatedly; it is "like a toad"; the glans is "like a violet heart ripped from a creature the size of a rabbit." Isabel's sexual musk reminds Tristão of his mother, "a whore, and even worse than a whore, for she drunkenly slept with men without money, and bred tadpole children like a human swamp of forgetfulness and casual desire." Revulsion is at the core of this book. At the end, a dead body is "a piece of litter," and a living one merely chemicals continuing "their fathomless commerce." *Brazil* concludes, "The spirit is strong, but blind matter is stronger." That now seems to be Updike's *summa theologica.*

It is a relief to turn to Iris Murdoch for whom the most interesting mysteries are still human.[2] Murdoch's twenty-fourth novel is a study of deception, and self-deception, set in modern-day London, with a large cast of characters held in thrall by *two* enchanters this time instead of the usual one. The first is the arrogant Lucas Graffe, a history professor fearfully admired by all. He wears yellow silk dressing gowns and is said to "look Chinese," with a sallow complexion, thin red lips, and "long very white teeth." The second is a mysterious Russian intruder, a man wearing green who comes between Lucas and his younger brother Clement and who hovers suspiciously near a household of women whom the two brothers are concerned to protect: the widowed Louise Anderson and her three pre-Raphaelitish daughters, Aleph, Sefton, and Moy. When the story begins, Lucas has apparently killed the Russian in self-defense, been acquitted, and disappeared. Nobody seems to know anything about this death or to have any curiosity about the trial, so mesmerized are they by Lucas' authority. Then the dead man returns to life, larger

[2] THE GREEN KNIGHT, by *Iris Murdoch*. Viking. $23.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

than life: he is the Russian enchanter, Peter Mir, who now demands both recognition and justice.

When the two enchanters meet, Murdoch's story becomes electrifying. Lucas is all cold intelligence, contempt, and cynical self-interest; Mir fairly throbs with an implacable moral outrage. Has Lucas acted virtuously? Was he defending his brother or trying to kill him? What does Lucas owe, if anything at all, to the man he almost killed? Was he his brother's keeper? And if so, who exactly *is* his brother? (*Mir*, we learn by the way, means both "world" and "peace" in Russian.) All these scenes, and issues, emerge from Clement Graffe's anxiety-ridden point of view. He so blindly admires his elder brother and fears Peter Mir that he will accept almost anything but the truth. Murdoch makes him a very sympathetic ditherer, almost comically confused about whom to trust or what to believe. That is a quality shared by many of the other members of this close-knit circle: there's the foolish Bellamy James, who dithers about renouncing the world to become "some sort of religious person" but so far has only managed to renounce his affectionate dog; there is young Harvey Blacket, who escapes his worries by breaking his leg so that others will worry about him. There are the Anderson girls, each drifting in a dreamy suspense about what she might do next: enter Oxford, fall in love, become an artist. And their mother Louise is no better, postponing and evading everything after the death of her husband, virtually sleepwalking her life away. Each of them feels indebted to Lucas in some way, and he banks on that—until Peter Mir calls everything into question, and begins to cast a different sort of spell.

Not all of this long novel is electrifying. Murdoch prefers a very neutral, declarative style that tends to underplay the intensely subjective points of view she is using. You hardly notice how often she cuts from one mind to another, they all sound so much alike. Her ironic detachment does not always work either. You wonder whether she does not linger indulgently over the intelligent, talented, uniquely interesting Anderson girls, each one of whom, it seems, might become a Virginia Woolf. Or whether using the point of view of Bellamy's collie is not going too far. But Lucas and Peter Mir are rightly kept impenetrable, seen only from the outside, which is what makes them so uncanny and powerful. Neither enchanter turns out to be what he pretends, but no matter: what others *imagine* them to be is what counts. That is Murdoch's double-edged lesson, both awful and reassuring.

Between the intrusiveness of Updike and the detachment of Murdoch, most writers of fiction these days opt for the latter. Elizabeth Tallent is no exception, even though she has written a book about Updike and favors the finely-tuned phrase as much as he does.[3]

[3] HONEY, by *Elizabeth Tallent*. Alfred A. Knopf. $22.00.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Honey is her third collection of stories, and probably her best. She slips easily from one sort of consciousness into another, all of them intimately felt and convincing: an elderly Nicaraguan seamstress being met at the airport by her strange red-haired son-in-law; a teenage boy suddenly enthralled by a girl in a strip-photo, six gawky pictures; an American poet on a book tour in Wales, somehow falling in love with her host; a divorced father in Albuquerque, a loser, carrying a gun and coming apart at the seams. These are not characters who understand themselves. Tallent's purpose seems rather to trace their flickering tensions and recognitions, bursts of doubt and hope, without making any judgments. Her empathy is for the struggle to understand. Here is the ex-husband with a gun ("James Was Here"), looking into a mirror:

> He protests *This isn't me*, which translates as *All this anger isn't me*, which translates, at the deepest level of self-contemplation, as *I'm a good man*, and at that level (he doesn't know himself any better than this; he can't get any more inward or try for any securer understanding), this avowal is met by doubt. He wills it into clarity—*a good man*, I'm telling you—but it's clouded. Doubt has credibility: well, look at him.

Typically, these characters are wedged into complex familial relationships: husbands and wives are pressured by their former spouses, children from different marriages pose conflicting responsibilities, new relationships call into question old habits and assumptions. As if that were not enough, Tallent likes to add other complications—differences in wealth, age, ethnicity, and even geography.

Yet the effect of these nine stories is far more celebratory than grim. Tallent keeps showing that consciousness is more nuanced than we assume, richer and more fluid. She has been praised for her elegant style by critics who fail to appreciate what it is for: representing with scrupulous attentiveness how her characters think. "She was sick with herself for not knowing how to *be* with him, furious or not angry in the least, but then, brilliant with decisiveness, she bolted through the back door." Or: "From the corner of his eye he sees her chin, then the wing of her nose, randomly illumined, and he feels as if he's taking in her face in pieces, and that he's never observed anyone more distinctly, and that she is who he was waiting for." Of all the accomplished short story writers working today, Tallent is the one upon whom nothing is lost.

Ethan Canin's second book of stories is much plainer fare, modeled on Cheever rather than Updike.[4] The book is comprised of four long first-person narratives by men who wish they could have clearer

[4] THE PALACE THIEF, by *Ethan Canin*. Random House. $21.00.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

consciences and more moral certainty. What it means to be masculine—a husband, father, or son—or to compete in aggressively male worlds, is an issue for all of them: a middle-aged accountant, the adolescent brother of a math genius, a divorced businessman, and an elderly prep-school teacher. The best of these interesting four is "Accountant," the painstaking story of a literal-minded man who needs to explain why he aborted a lucrative business deal. In the course of it he also puzzles over why he so loves his impulsive wife, why of his two daughters he loves more the difficult, unhappy one. He also broods over why, after mild heroics in a businessman's baseball game, and being congratulated by Willie Mays (what greater dream come true?), he bungles the glorious moment. Canin portrays a deeply conventional man here, an archetypal accountant, whose every thought and action seem neatly entered in a ledger. Yet somewhere within is a more passionate, imaginative, and moral self than he can bear to acknowledge. Others see it but he cannot. The story ends with these Cheever-like words:

> I was seized, as I sometimes am, with sadness. I suppose I was wondering, although it is strange for me to admit it, why, of all the lives that might have been mine, I had led the one I have just described.

Canin suggests no condemnations here, only the pathos of someone gripping the bars of his cage. "City of Broken Hearts," about a Boston businessman whose wife leaves him, is almost as good. The man struggles to figure out what his grown-up son already knows about women, some talent for speaking with them, some capacity for love, that he lacks. But he's up against a post-feminist generation, and the lessons come hard. Canin knows how to remain respectfully invisible in these male monologues, surrendering the page to his uncertain speakers. It will be interesting to see where he goes from here.

Much more complex impersonations are possible when the narrator of a story can summon up other voices to tell it too, or merge her own voice with others. Faulkner invented a dozen different ways of doing this, dissolving his own storytelling into multiple and competing voices. Now John Gregory Brown has found a fresh way to do it too, in what must be the best first novel of the year.[5] His speaker is a thirty-seven-year-old woman, Meredith Eagen, who is reconstructing the troubled past of her family, and particularly the era of its most dramatic upheavals when she was twelve: Meredith's loving stepmother was banished, their New Orleans house abandoned, their old black caretaker (Murphy Warrington, missing for years) nearly

[5] DECORATIONS IN A RUINED CEMETERY, by *John Gregory Brown*. Houghton Mifflin. $19.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

drowned in a freakish bridge collapse. Meredith and her twin brother Lowell are left baffled; their father Thomas is withdrawn into some private grief and rage. Almost at once the narrator's voice divides in two, the remembering adult's and the uncomprehending twelve-year-old's. Then comes the gentle voice of Catherine, Meredith's step-mother, in long letters written from North Carolina, telling her side of the painful break-up. The patience and tenderness of these letters is strong, the love in them almost palpable; Brown has listened well to voices like Eudora Welty's.

But the real family history cannot be known until Murphy, the novel's third narrator, begins to speak. The black man's voice is crucial: it was his love of Grandfather Eagen's wife (she could pass for white) that bound him to the family, and still does. Brown manages to balance Murphy's frustration and anger at a racist society against his admiration and love for the Eagen family, his racial pride against his personal integrity:

> But what the nigger's pride does for him is greater than any white man will ever know. The nigger puts his hand out and smiles and shakes the man's hand and says, *I appreciate it mightily, sir.* The nigger accepts the kind offer of charity but all the while hangs on, like he's hanging on to the side of a cliff, to the notion that at any moment, and just as quick as snatching an apple pie off a window-sill, he could grab the white man's neck in his hands, feel the pulsing blood against his fingertips, and put a quick and easy end to him.

That this voice is part of Meredith's family, in fact virtually her own voice, is the sort of recognition that gives Brown's novel its depth. At the end you feel the pathos of a woman who can neither ignore the burdens of her past nor come to terms with them. Brown's epigraph and title are taken from Wallace Stevens' "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery": "If ever the search for a tranquil belief should end, / The future might stop emerging out of the past. . . ." But of course it does not.

Brown is not the only male writer these days to adopt a female narrator; William Boyd in *Brazzaville Beach* and Norman Rush in *Mating* have provided influential examples, and now Paul Theroux has done it too.[6] He impersonates a fourteen-year-old girl in his latest novel, and more than gets away with it. She is a scruffy undersized kid named Jilly Farina, living in poverty with a drunken father. Along comes Millroy the Magician, a middle-aged carnival veteran whose magic is really magic, to Jilly, and her innocence is just what his faltering ego needs. He virtually steals her away, but Jilly is glad to

[6] MILLROY THE MAGICIAN, by *Paul Theroux*. Random House. $24.00.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

become whatever he likes—acolyte, best audience, alter ego, even (in a disguise) his "son." As Millroy's ambitions escalate—television magician in Boston, then TV evangelist and food fanatic, then vegetarian restaurant entrepreneur and national cult figure—Jilly evades the question of what Millroy really is to her: not her lover, but just as emotionally intimate as a lover might be; not her father, but just as protective and dominating as a father might be. Seen by Jilly, Millroy is a convincingly fabulous and problematic figure. When she holds him up against her dismal background—Buzzard's Bay trailer parks, dirty gas stations, all the dreary backwaters of Cape Cod that Theroux knows so well—the novel works wonderfully.

But Theroux is too much of a performer to be content with that. He allows Jilly to become, for long stretches of the novel, only passive, a mirror for the magician's show. Millroy is like the father in *The Mosquito Coast,* using his son for admiration and overpowering him. Millroy has a unique reading of the Bible which decodes all of its references to food as guides to perfect health. He has mystical theories about pleasurable digestion, internal purification, and sensuous evacuation. He becomes the archenemy of America's rampant carnivorosity, its cholesterol-loaded diets, its capitalism of gluttony. He wants to be a Messiah for troubled urban youth, whom he converts into Moonies of a sort, promising them lifespans of 200 years. He reads people's faces for the heart failures and cancers that bad diets will cause, and he investigates their bathrooms and toilets for evidence of moral character. While all this may be satiric and funny, Theroux does not know when to stop. He cannot resist calling attention to his sub-text, the novelist as magician and performer, himself as protagonist. There are still fine moments when Jilly brings the real world back into perspective. When she escapes from Millroy's spell for a time and goes home to discover a death in the family, she realizes how much he has displaced her humanity. He would have explained the death as "bad food and congested bowels." Now she recognizes what is wrong: "Millroy logic explained life and death, and this explanation took the place of grief." But there are too few such moments; the novel never fully recovers from the author's fatal impulse to dominate his narrator.

Anita Brookner can never be found as a performer in her novels, but she dominates them nevertheless by sheer intelligence and restraint. Her most recent novel is exceptionally fine, although it may seem austere and even bloodless to some readers at first.[7] That is because its narrator is so self-effacing, and the woman she writes about principally—her aunt Dolly—so unpleasant. Jane Manning is a coolly detached narrator, the child of eerily passive parents: "I felt a painful love for these mild and conscientious parents, whose moder-

[7] DOLLY, by *Anita Brookner.* Random House. $22.00.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ate voices unfitted me for the realities of the world I was to inhabit." Jane's spoiled uncle Hugo marries Dolly, a glamorous-looking foreigner, and they seem to embody all the flashy worldliness her parents lack. When Hugo dies, Jane begins to see what Dolly really is, a desperately manipulative woman, dependent on the wealth and social position of others, supremely selfish yet a sycophant, feigning love for others but receiving none herself. Brookner makes you want to scream at this tiresome, complacent, overbearing person, who has always found Jane's reticence a bore. "Charm, Jane, charm!" she criticizes brightly, as if that were the key to success.

After the deaths of Jane's parents Dolly weighs even more heavily upon her. It's partly a matter of conscience: the woman is "family" after all and nearly without money. But Jane must also recognize a deeper reason behind Dolly's contempt for her: Jane has never had to scrounge and pretend and put on the charm as Dolly has. In fact Jane is the only one in a position to understand the misery of Dolly's existence, the courage behind its crude ambition and the relentlessness of its defeats. It is characteristic of Brookner's moral sense that Jane be forced at last to admire a woman who is utterly lacking in any respect or understanding for her. "What troubled me most of all," Jane concludes, "was the fact that I felt myself to be in some way inferior to Dolly." That seems to be the price of Jane's virtue: she will always be too scrupulous, too self-doubting, too good, not to put someone else's qualities ahead of her own. The violent bear it away, not the scrupulous. Brookner makes us feel the pathos of that, the depth of Jane's virtue and vulnerability, but she does something else even more difficult: she makes us sorrow for Dolly as well. This can only be the result of the most selfless impersonations.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

HAROLD FROMM

Himmelfarb, Mill, and the Dodges of Liberty

> What happens to our passion for literature when any "text" qualifies as literature, when theory is elevated above poetry and the critic above the poet, and when literature, interpretation, and theory alike are said to be indeterminate and infinitely malleable? What happens to our respect for philosophy—the "love of wisdom," as it once was—when we are told that philosophy has nothing to do with either wisdom or virtue, that what passes as metaphysics is really linguistics, that morality is a form of aesthetics, and that the best thing we can do is not to take philosophy seriously? And what happens to our sense of the past when we are told that there is no past save that which the historian creates . . . ? And what happens when we look into the abyss and see no real beasts but only a pale reflection of ourselves—of our particular race, class, and gender; or, worse yet, when we see only the metaphorical, rhetorical, mythical, linguistic, semiotic, figurative, fictive simulations of our imaginations?

THIS PASSAGE FROM THE TITLE ESSAY that opens Gertrude Himmelfarb's new collection, *On Looking into the Abyss*,[1] provides us with the key ideas that link these essays together. Though for the most part previously published, the individual pieces have been expanded, revised, and arranged in such a manner as to produce a tersely integrated, extremely well-written statement of the issues that confront Western intellectuals in the last decade of our century. Or if I may express it even more tersely, the overarching inquiry of this book is "What is to be done when the very idea of 'truth' has fallen into disfavor?" That this question is not merely rhetorical can be seen in the number of recent articles and books that challenge academic humanists who dismiss the hard sciences as just another mythology, another form of fiction or ideology, like "literature" and history. And, of course, if our isolation from any independently existing "real world" is indeed a condition of our existence, then (as Prof. Himmelfarb laments) such historical phenomena as the Holocaust can be treated as mere constructs by those with anti-Semitic ideologies.

On Looking into the Abyss provides an artful distillation of the problems of postmodernism. Its dedicatee and hovering spirit is

[1] ON LOOKING INTO THE ABYSS: Untimely Thoughts on Culture and Society, by *Gertrude Himmelfarb*. Alfred A. Knopf. $23.00.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Lionel Trilling, whose "moral realism," resistance to the academic, and distrust of liberal utopias permeate these essays. What confounds Himmelfarb most of all is the naturalization by today's intellectuals of so much that had been regarded as extraordinary by Trilling and others, a naturalization that began to worry Trilling in his last years and that now, driven by careerism, professionalism, and the need for new academic grist, has escalated into a pedagogical norm, even as it filters out the ethical content of everything it touches. In literature, it domesticates authors like Dostoevsky, Kafka, and Nietzsche, chief denizens of Trilling's abyss. In the case of historical biography, yesterday's heroes, having been treated with veneration by the Victorians, are now reworked into schlemiels by the New Biographer, who becomes the analyst, judge, and superior of his subject, out-Stracheying the redoubtable Lytton himself, while the feminists mount an attack on the "big guys" (and the pop-culturists write endless drivel about Marilyn Monroe or cyberspace). As Himmelfarb puts it, "It can no longer be taken for granted that Milton deserves to be more 'privileged' than Mickey Mouse, that high culture is higher, more elevating, than popular culture, and that some events in history are more momentous than others."

In the well-wrought essay on Mill, Himmelfarb poses the question, "How can a society that celebrates the virtues of liberty, individuality, variety, and tolerance sustain itself when those virtues, carried to extremes, threaten to subvert that liberal society and, with it, those very virtues?" The source of the problem is traced back to Mill's "one very simple principle" in *On Liberty*, "that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection" and the prevention of harm to others. Mill's objection to censorship was that it prevented the sort of open discussion needed to discern truth.

In denying society power to squelch even a distasteful morality if it does not harm others and in evincing a hostility toward religion that relegates it to a private rather than a public space, Mill was operating in a world where it could be taken for granted that "those virtues that had already been acquired, by means of religion, tradition, law, and all the other resources of civilization—would continue to be valued and exercised." But we now live in a culture that "resents the 'tyranny' of society, custom, and public opinion, that is profoundly suspicious of any authority suggestive of a 'moral police.'" Himmelfarb concludes that "if liberals can take satisfaction in civil rights legislation, conservatives can be distressed by laws that condone sexual promiscuity, undermine 'family values,' and sanction 'alternative life-styles' that they find immoral." And she is highly sensitive to what appear to be deep inconsistencies in liberal thinking, such as the mentality that legislates against hate speech but allows speech that is obscene, pornographic, or blasphemous. "Why," she asks, "is it proper for the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

government to prohibit insalubrious foods but not sadistic movies, to control the pollution of the environment but not of the culture, to prevent racial segregation but not moral degradation?" Or as she acutely puts it, "The photograph of a crucifix immersed in urine can be exhibited in a public school, but a crucifix not immersed in urine cannot be exhibited." What she finds lacking in the evolution of Millian libertarianism is the sense of community "that made liberty consonant with the common good and individuality with the commonality of interests in the commonwealth," a "community" that no longer seems to exist and whose absence allows individual and minority mores to clash to a greater degree than current memory can recall. The upshot, then, is that consensus is in short supply.

Nor is liberty the precondition of truth for postmodernist thinkers, Himmelfarb remarks, but rather "the precondition for the liberation from truth itself," because to them "truth" is hegemonic, phallocentric, logocentric and all the rest of it. Mill, she believes, would not have been happy with this development, "but his principle of absolute liberty, which 'privileges' error together with truth, cannot be absolved entirely from responsibility for it."

Professor Himmelfarb has a particular quarrel with Richard Rorty, who thinks that philosophical discourse should be taken *playfully* because only "a metaphysical prig" believes in truth and reality. To which Himmelfarb responds, "Perhaps this book should be labeled 'The Confessions of an Unregenerate Prig,' for it is dedicated to the proposition that there are such things as truth and reality. . . ." For me, an admirer of Rorty's intellect, wit, and prose style, this conflict is particularly troubling, as I have to acknowledge the weight of Himmelfarb's (and not hers alone) critical response to some of his writings. It is this very conflict between Rorty's "metaphysics" of skepticism and Himmelfarb's (and everybody else's) practical need for beliefs and values (to underwrite daily actions) that constitutes a dilemma of which no resolution seems to be visible on the horizon. Rorty, after all, is a quintessential liberal with refined tastes and great compassion, in many respects resembling Himmelfarb herself in consequence of his preference for Western bourgeois capitalist society and his ambivalent relationship to the academic establishment that fancies itself the avant-garde (and who don't like Rorty very much but are not entirely certain he is the enemy). But for Himmelfarb, Rorty is a late product of the liberalism that her essay on Mill considers an unwitting source of contemporary nihilistic disarray. My own ideal person would have the liberal philosophical skepticism (and Enlightenment prose style) of Richard Rorty and the practical, hardheaded, neoconservative skepticism (and Enlightenment prose style) of Gertrude Himmelfarb, but such a hybrid would likely succumb to a nervous breakdown too early on to be of any use.

In the last essay in this collection, "Postmodernist History," Professor Himmelfarb reminds her more revolutionary colleagues that their

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"new" historiographical axioms are far from new, that historians have all along been aware of the limitations of the historical records on which they base their work, as well as the selectivity of any historical narrative and the subjectivity of the writer. Historians also know that they are part of a present from which they cannot escape, however much they would like to recreate an earlier age. She objects to the belief of postmodern historians that "because there is no absolute, total truth, there can be no partial, contingent truths." Narrativity, of course, has come in for the harshest repudiation: because all narratives are constructed, are supplied with a causality, a teleology, they are regarded by some historians, preeminently Hayden White, as not just partially inaccurate but more or less totally fictitious, the products of rhetoric, aesthetics, and ideology. And if they are indeed created artifacts, why should they not be created for political purposes? But if the feminists can write feminist history, "why should the black historian not do the same—even if such a history might 'marginalize' women? And why not the working-class historian, who might marginalize both women and blacks? . . . . And why not the homosexual historian, who might marginalize heterosexuals? For that matter, why not the traditional dead-white-male (or even live-white-male) historian, who might marginalize . . . all other species?" If power, not truth, is the goal, because there is no truth, then why not? But Himmelfarb believes the alternative to unattainable perfect truth is not utter falsity but relative and contingent truth that can be approximated by the diligent, scrupulous historian whose motive is not principally ideological.

As if this book did not present us with enough *explicit* questions, it also generates, but without actually raising them, another set of questions of equal or greater importance: What is the relation of prose style to truth (with or without quotation marks); what is the value of tradition in a world of innovation; and where are the norms of civil society to come from in an era when particularist differentia (ethnic, religious, political) have reached the point of an obsession, if not a pathology?

Prose style, a branch of rhetoric, was never a nugatory aspect of writing, but today it has acquired a heightened political urgency like everything else. What I have been calling the Enlightenment Style harks back to Descartes' "clear and distinct" ideas and the empiricism of Bacon's *Advancement of Learning* as mobilized by French and English neoclassicism. The writings of Dryden, Hume, and Locke are the quintessential examples of this style, which is associated with the scientific revolution and the drive for objectivity and certainty. So influential has it been in the English-speaking world that not only Himmelfarb but Richard Rorty too (who uses the style to argue *against* objectivity and certainty) are descendants of this tradition, which admittedly reaches an extreme in some of the writings of G. E. Moore and the various positivists. In Himmelfarb's case we have a wonderful

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

specimen of a distinctively Anglo-American style, a prose that is always clear, never reliant upon jargon, able to convey complex ideas without obfuscation, a witty no-nonsense vehicle of a pre-eminent public intellectual. And to suppose such a style were easy to come by would be a big mistake. In contrast to the postmodern faux-Continental academic mode that can be mastered by every graduate student in a couple of hours, prose as graceful as this is a hard-won accomplishment. Ironically enough, this "simple" public style is now regarded in certain circles as the language of anti-democratic, rear-guard, elitist patriarchs who are attempting to throw a veil of clear and distinct ideas over a fragmented and unintelligible world, in the interests of holding on to their power. And in a world where everything is a text, language *is* power.

In a provocative article on the takeover of composition studies by litcrit professionals, Steve Kogan, an English professor at Manhattan Community College of CUNY, tells us that "it is a premise among many compositionists . . . that clarity and correctness are subjective categories determined 'by who holds the political power to decide what constitutes good language use.' . . . . Those who speak on behalf of standards in writing are often scorned as 'gatekeepers' or 'gate-keeper intellectuals.'" Composition theorists tend to reject "reason and practical knowledge for the utopian premises of radical theory, which offers its believers a language that champions 'the other' and 'the marginal' by unmasking . . . the 'phallocratic' oppression of syntax itself." As if this were not enough, Luce Irigaray "considers logic and clarity evils of patriarchal thought . . . [and] calls for feminists to revolutionize sense, destroy 'the logical grid of the reader-writer,' and 'drive him out of his mind.'" Kogan cites William Dowling as a professor who "defends the writing of impenetrable prose as a necessary strategy in radical studies."[2]

Although there is little reason to deny that prose style is a reflection of the mentality of the writer and his milieu and that both are indirectly connected with the social structure that empowers them, this connection would obtain regardless of who the writer or what the social structure happened to be. The numinous Heidegger-derived style, the Lacanian, Foucauldian, or pop-culture styles, all of these prevailing modes are simply other *ipse dixit* rhetorics, smokescreens of nebulous verbiage too often transmitting radically incomprehensible assertions *de haut en bas*. (A few pages of Heidegger on Being would flummox anybody.) This obscurity can often serve to the writer's advantage, because bad writing's sloppy inarticulateness invites the hermeneutic attention that we normally reserve for profundity, whereas clear writing seems too transparent to make a fuss about. In this regard, Gertrude Himmelfarb's prose is neither more nor less

[2] Steve Kogan, " 'Discourse Production': Composition Studies in the Grip of Literary Theory," *Academic Questions*, Spring 1994, pp. 55–71.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

culturally "empowered" than that of Jane Gallop or Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick or Fredric Jameson. Clear and distinct writing may very well make the nature of things appear clearer and more distinct than it really is, but the portentousness of radical style suggests the ecclesiastical thunders of sacrosanct liturgies and the powerful churches that promulgate them. Dare an assistant professor derride Derrida?

When we turn to the other implicit questions raised by this book—the priority of tradition vs. innovation and the quest for a source of norms to guide an individualistic and heterogeneous society that appears to be losing its consensus (or that never really had one)—Himmelfarb becomes vulnerable to charges of glossing over matters more weighty and problematical than she is ready to acknowledge. The common criticism directed against neoconservative thought is that it fails to recognize the extent to which judgments of "natural" and "moral" are conditioned by the times and places in which they are made and the interests of the people who make them. This tendency to naturalize or transcendentalize purely temporal and transitory beliefs and customs is the chief weakness of *On Looking into the Abyss*, but it is surprising to discover it in someone as self-conscious and culturally aware as Himmelfarb.

Take, for instance, a remark like the following from the end of the chapter on Mill:

> A liberty that is divorced from tradition and convention, from morality and religion, that makes the individual the sole repository and arbiter of all values and puts him in an adversarial relationship to society and the state—such a liberty is a grave peril to liberalism itself. For when that liberty is found wanting, when it violates the moral sense of the community or is incompatible with the legitimate demands of society, there is no moderating principle to take its place, no resting place between the wild gyrations of libertarianism and paternalism.

And elsewhere, Himmelfarb alludes to "the time-honored religions that continue to command intellectual respect as well as pious devotion." In speaking of recent nationalist slaughter, she contrasts the newer violent nationalisms with the legitimate and pacific older ones (i.e., the Western ones) that are "tempered and elevated by religion as well as by all the other resources of civilization."

But these gestures of remediation and reconstruction, here and elsewhere, too often consist of *obiter dicta* involving global assumptions of a metaphorical sort that fail to measure up to the problems at hand. By religion (and "intellectual respect"), for example, Professor Himmelfarb always seems to mean (as I read her) only a certain kind of genteel, American, very much historically determined, mainline Protestantism, Catholicism, or Judaism, whereas "religion" includes a whole beehive of cells (that is to say, not only Western but Eastern too,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Selected Back Issues of The Hudson Review

ANNIVERSARY ISSUES:

30th, SPRING 1978 Robert Martin Adams on Modernism, Robert Pinsky, David Ignatow, Guy Davenport, Denis Donoghue, Linda Pastan, Philip Dacey, Patricia Meyer Spacks. $15.00.

35th, SPRING 1983 A. R. Ammons, Davenport, Dana Gioia on Business and Poetry, Louis Simpson, Roger Rosenblatt, Charles Tomlinson, Joseph Epstein. $15.00.

40th, SPRING 1988 Robert McDowell's narrative poem "The Fifties," Frederick Brown's "Zola and Manet," Simpson, William H. Pritchard, Donald Hall, Alice Bloom. $15.00.

***SPECIAL ISSUE: Poetry and Ecology, Autumn 1970** Berry, Ammons, Snyder and Stafford. $25.00.

THE 80S:

WINTER 1980–81 Berry "Standing by Words"/Pritchard "Blackmur's Last Song"/Gioia/V. S. Naipaul/Fainlight. $6.00.

SPRING 1981 Gerald Early "Hot Spicks Versus Cool Spades"/Tomlinson/ Philip Levine/Joyce Carol Oates. $6.00.

AUTUMN 1981 Gilberto Perez on Buster Keaton/Gioia/Ostriker. $6.00.

WINTER 1981–82 Mudrick "Voltaire and His Biographers"/Simpson "Realists"/Akhmatova/Pasternak. $6.00.

SPRING 1982 Spacks "In Praise of Gossip"/Laurence Lieberman/Epstein/ Emily Grosholz. $6.00.

SUMMER 1982 Oates "Notes on Failure"/Alfred Corn "Time to Read Proust"/Derek Mahon/Andrew Hudgins/Gioia/Booth. $6.00.

AUTUMN 1982 Cushing Strout "James's Lady and Wharton's Age"/Stafford/Simpson. $6.00.

AUTUMN 1983 John Finlay "Flaubert in Egypt"/McDowell/Derwent May. $6.00.

WINTER 1983–84 Early "Prizefighting in America"/Dean Flower on James Merrill/Wendy Lesser on Hardwick/the Hamptons. $6.00.

SUMMER 1984 Lesser "George Gissing's Odd Women"/Eric A. Havelock "The Double Vision of Greek Tragedy"/Marcia B. Siegel on Peter Martins and Twyla Tharp. $6.00.

***LIMITED NUMBER OF VINTAGE THR'S AVAILABLE**

Please inquire for prices.

WINTER 1965–66 Interview with Anne Sexton.

WINTER 1961–62 Robert Lowell's essay on William Carlos Williams, poems by Williams.

ADDRESS ORDERS TO:
The Hudson Review, *684 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10021.*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

not only upper-middle-class, but vulgar too) that she chooses simply to ignore—but ignoring them won't make them go away. So they have to be dealt with as part of today's American culture as a whole. It is their very multiplicity amidst the dwindling of a majority ethos that has undone the power of "tradition" as a cement for society, creating the need for a new tradition, whatever that would be. And secularism and anti-religion are positions of enduring validity and vitality that Himmelfarb does not take into account in a manner commensurate with their immense contributions to American society. The result of her limited endorsements, however, is to "privilege," as they now say, phenomena narrowly associated with a particular time and place, formations that are trying to pass themselves off as timeless universals but that are no longer effective. This practice leaves her open to charges of hegemony and repression because it mistakes her own limited "set" for the world at large. (The radical left does this all the time.) In the days of Dr. Johnson, one could say, "He's an atheist, sir, and there's an end on it," but one cannot say these things any more.

Take, as another example, the remark about Andres Serrano's controversial photograph of a crucifix in urine being displayable at a school but not a crucifix that is not in urine. As brilliant as the remark seemed in its context, it fails badly as a philosophical observation. For what Professor Himmelfarb neglected to say was that the allowable crucifix in urine was a crucifix, so to speak, in quotation marks (i.e., as part of an aesthetic representation, however gross) whereas the unallowable crucifix not in urine was a literal one—and public, tax-supported institutions in a secular nation should not be allowed to promulgate any particular religion. For Himmelfarb, however, it goes without saying that there is something good for everybody in a crucifix or what it represents (or a Star of David, or religion per se)—but in this I think she is wrong.

Similar problems with other striking rhetorical figures pervade the book. For instance: "the Surgeon General can properly compel cigarette packages to carry a warning declaring them hazardous to health, but . . . the Attorney General cannot authorize a label on obscene recordings declaring them deleterious to the soul." As rhetoric, this is appealing. But as *thinking*, it is unsatisfactory. I am as unhappy as Professor Himmelfarb about the foulness of TV and pop culture; and I don't even like the recent liberation of *The New Yorker* into an onrush of four-letter words. But both obscenity and the soul are very murky and questionable concepts that can't be adequately handled by means of a witticism. And, of course, "deleterious to the soul" is just not the same order of thing as "hazardous to the health." That the final hazard to one's health is death, everyone in the world will agree, but what is the final hazard to one's soul? (And in 1994 what is a soul, when the very notion of a self is under fire?) A library of volumes has been and remains to be written on this nebulous subject. But as a basis for legislation it is seriously defective.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In the passage quoted above from the essay on Mill, Professor Himmelfarb regards her key terms as self-evident, but when she speaks of "a liberty that is divorced from tradition and convention, from morality and religion," we really need to know *what* tradition and convention she has in mind and *what* morality and religion, as well. For is not the very issue at hand that there is no consensus on this matter in contemporary America? Some thinkers claim there may not even have been such a consensus in the past, but only a repression that made it look like consensus. The same can be said about "the moral sense of the community," and the "legitimate demands of society." Is there a community agreement about what constitutes a moral sense or a legitimate demand? Or were these things formerly handed down by a ruling elite whose ideas and preferences had a particular historically constructed provenance and justification but who are not any longer adequate to perform the necessary ruling?

Like professors Himmelfarb and Rorty, I think the U.S.—for all its extremely grave faults and crimes, even against its own citizens, as in nuclear testing and involuntary radiation experiments, to name just two recent revelations—is an historical nonpareil, a lesser evil in an evil world, even if the law is frequently corrupted and the U.S. participates in colonialist and ecological exploitation and genocidal wars like the one with Iraq. But if forced to choose between unsatisfactory extreme positions, I would incline rather toward Rorty's radical skepticism about truth than Himmelfarb's "it goes without saying" certitude about religion, morality, nationhood, and so forth. As a critique of today's increasingly rudderless ship of state, *On Looking into the Abyss* is cogent and powerful. It zeroes in on the problems and eloquently exposes them for what they are. As a fix for our increasingly calamitous ills, however, it fails to acknowledge that you can't go home again—and never could.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

HAYDEN CARRUTH's most recent books are *Suicides and Jazzers* (1992), *The Collected Shorter Poems, 1946–1991* (1992), and *The Collected Longer Poems* (1994). His *Selected Essays* will be published in January 1995. . . . LAWRENCE DOUGLAS* is an assistant professor in the Department of Law, Jurisprudence and Social Thought, Amherst College. . . . SUSAN BALÉE is the founding editor of *Northeast Corridor*, a literary magazine based at Beaver College in Glenside, Pennsylvania. A special issue, "Parents and Children," is currently on sale at major bookstores across America. . . . JOSIAH FISK* is a writer and musician who lives in Rockport, Massachusetts. His reviews of classical music appear regularly in the *Boston Herald*. . . . MARK JARMAN's latest collection of poetry, *Questions for Ecclesiastes*, will

**Asterisk indicates a new contributor.*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

appear in 1995 from David R. Godine. Currently, he is finishing a novel. . . . DANIEL HOFFMAN is the author, most recently, of *Words to Create a World* (U. of Michigan Press), a book of essays and reviews on poetry since modernism. He is the Schelling Professor of English Emeritus, University of Pennsylvania. . . . COLETTE INEZ's latest book of poems, *Getting Under Way: New and Selected Poems*, has been recently published by Story Line Press. Currently on the faculty of Columbia University's Writing Program, she has completed a libretto for an opera on the life of Mary Shelley and is at work on a prose memoir. . . . NORMAN WILLIAMS* lives with his wife and two children in Vermont, where he practices law. His book *The Unlovely Child* was published by Knopf in 1985.

MAXINE KUMIN's new book, *Women, Animals, and Vegetables: Essays and Stories*, is just out from Norton. . . . JOHN FREDERICK NIMS's most recent books of poetry are *The Six-Cornered Snowflake* (New Directions) and *Zany in Denim* (University of Arkansas Press). In 1993 he received the Folger Library's O.B. Hardison Poetry Prize. . . . ROBERT FARNSWORTH's* books of poems are *Three Or Four Hills and a Cloud* (1982) and *Honest Water* (1989), both from Wesleyan University Press. . . . BERT CARDULLO was named in June to the theatre-and-film advisory panel of the National Endowment for the Humanities. His essay on Murnau's *Nosferatu* was recently reprinted in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (Gale). . . . MARCIA B. SEIGEL lectured on six contemporary American choreographers at Crown dance studio in Taipei in July. She also gave a seminar for faculty members at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts. . . . JOHN LOUGHERY's anthology *Into the Widening World: International Coming-of-Age Stories* will be published by Persea Books in October. . . . KAREN WILKIN is author of *Anthony Caro* (London: Prestel, 1991). Last May she moderated a symposium at the University of Hartford: "Caro, Noland, Olitsky," and wrote the catalogue essay for the exhibition of the same name at the Joseloff Art Gallery, University of Hartford. . . . *Playing It by Ear: Literary Essays and Reviews* by WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD is to be published by the University of Massachusetts Press this winter. . . . ROBERT SCHULTZ has just returned to Iowa and Luther College after a two-year leave in Charlottesville. He recently completed his novel, *The Madhouse Nudes*. . . . R.S. GWYNN has a new chapbook from Aralia Press called *The Area Code of God*. He is a professor of English at Lamar University. . . . JOHN HAINES's latest book is *The Owl in the Mask of the Dreamer: Collected Poems*, Graywolf Press, 1993. He is presently preparing a volume of essays for the same press. . . . DEAN FLOWER is working on a critical edition of Edgar Allan Poe stories. . . . HAROLD FROMM spent much of the past year doing the final editing of Gloria Fromm's *Windows on Modernism: Selected Letters of Dorothy Richardson*, which was not quite completed at the time of her death (in 1992) and is scheduled for publication in the fall by the University of Georgia Press.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Phoenix • Poets

IRVING FELDMAN

The Life and Letters

"If one measure of poetic greatness is the ability to redefine the limits of what poetry can do, *The Life and Letters* is a great book, astonishing in its range of language and invention, and utterly enthralling in its combination of irreverent humor, linguistic play, and deadly insight. Feldman's sensibility combines and integrates in remarkable ways intellectual suspiciousness and lyric, almost visionary, reach. *The Life and Letters* is Feldman's best."—Alan Shapiro

"Irving Feldman's powerful new and long-awaited book is amazing in its moral intensity—at times sharply satiric, at times prophetically broad—and in the depth, rather than only the pointedness, of his wit."
—John Hollander

Paper $11.95 104 pages
Cloth edition available

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS
5801 S. Ellis Ave., Chicago, IL 60637

Christmas is coming!

Why not order The Hudson Review for family and friends at our holiday discount rates.

First subscription: $20;

each additional one: $15.

No limit on orders.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

IN THIS ISSUE:

The ancients were right: what one seeks is wisdom. But they were also a little naive, having never suffered the degradations of mass culture and technocracy. The greater part of wisdom is its inaccessibility. Yet I still believe in the efficacy of straight thought—when it is in the service of magnanimity.

—Hayden Carruth, "Fragments of a Memoir," p. 345.

It's 9 P.M. on a Wednesday night in Milledgeville, but the Wal-Mart is hopping. All of a sudden, I realize that *this* is Flannery O'Connor's Georgia. If she were alive and writing in 1994, this is where she'd be researching her characters. You want evangelists? Check out the Jehovah's Witnesses handing out copies of *The Watch Tower* by the front door. Looking for a tattooed man? Here's a shirtless one buying an electric drill.

—Susan Balée, "Flannery O'Connor Resurrected," p. 377.

Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Bartok, Ives—all "Modernists"—made a brave show of their independence from what they considered to be a hidebound past. They injected their art with that most Modernist of all qualities: ironic detachment. But they always paid close attention to the past, and for the most part they held it in the highest respect. In their studios they toiled as hard as their predecessors had, and at many of the same labors.

What they did do was to broadcast an attitude.

—Josiah Fisk, "The New Simplicity: The Music of Górecki, Tavener and Pärt," p. 394.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED